

Sunday, January 23, 2022

Holy Be Your Name

(Series: "Lord, Teach Us to Pray")
(Message Three)

Scripture:

*⁹ "This, then, is how you should pray:
"Our Father in heaven,
Hallowed be your name...
(Matthew 6:9)*

Message:

Henri Nouwen, in *The Way of the Heart*, writes,

Over the last decades we have been inundated by a torrent of words. Wherever we go we are surrounded by words: words whispered softly, loudly proclaimed, angrily screamed; words spoken, recited, or sung; words in podcasts, in books, on walls, in the sky; words in many sounds, many colors, many forms; words to be heard, read, seen, glanced at; words which flicker on and off, move slowly, dance, jump, wiggle. Words, words, words! They form the floor, walls and ceiling of our existence.

Recently I was driving through Los Angeles, and suddenly I had the strange sensation of driving through a huge dictionary. Wherever I looked there were words trying to take my eyes off the road. They said, "Use me, take me, buy me, drink me, smell me, touch me, kiss me, sleep with me." In such a world, who can maintain any respect for words.?

One of the main problems is that in this chatty society, silence has become a very fearful thing. For most people, silence creates itchiness and nervousness. Many experience silence not as full and rich, but as empty and hollow. For them, silence is like a gaping abyss which can swallow them up. As soon as the minister says in a worship service, "Let us be silent for a few minutes," people tend to become restless and preoccupied with only one thought: "When will this be over?"

Sometimes speaking violates the moment; sometimes – e.g., walking in a cemetery or by the Vietnam Memorial – silence offers the deepest respect. Those are holy times. Like coming before God in prayer.

Our prayer is “*Holy be Your Name;*” it is offered in the presence – in the *chapel* (i.e., a place of worship) - of a holy God. It is a holy moment.

If there are walls, you won’t notice them; if there are pews, you won’t need them. Your eyes are fixed on God; your knees are on the floor. In the center is a throne; the only one you notice is God; you understand who is kneeling and who is sitting on the throne. It is a holy moment. “*The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him.*” (**Habakkuk 2:20**)

This is worship. This is prayer. This is life. Don’t worry about the right words; it is not words he seeks; focus on a right heart – *a broken and contrite heart* (**Psalm 51:17**).

Addressing our prayers to “Our Abba” reminds us that God is both near and “in the heavens;” He is our Creator who became “God with Us” in the incarnation.

Our praying rests on the premise that God can hear us when we speak to him; and that we can hear him as he speaks to us. So following the “address,” Jesus teaches us **six requests** we can and should make to the Father in our prayers. We tend to divide these petitions into two groups:

The first group of three we often call the “thou” or “vertical” petitions because they focus on God. They are: making holy the name of God, the coming of God’s kingdom, and following the will of God. In these petitions we talk to the Father about the Father.

The second group of three, we often call the “we” or “horizontal” petitions because they focus us on our world. They are daily bread, forgiveness in the community, and freedom from evil. In these petitions, we talk to the Father about the Family.

The reality, however, is that all six petitions involve a **sovereign** act of God AND an **obedient** response on the part of the pray-er. For example,

...God makes his own name holy AND I am expected to live a holy life.

...God brings in the kingdom AND I am to work toward the goal of its coming.

...God fulfills his will AND I am to discover his will and obey it in my daily life.

...God gives the gift of daily bread AND I must work to earn it.

...God forgives me AND I must forgive and,

...God guides me away from evil AND I must live a life of righteousness.

The comprehensive nature of all these petitions promoted Jeremias, an early Church father, to write: *“the Lord’s prayer is the clearest and, in spite of its terseness, the richest summary of Jesus’ proclamation (teaching) we possess.”*

This prayer is not only designed to **deepen** our relationship with our *Abba Father*, it is also designed to be community **forming** and (personal) life **transforming**.

Let’s take a look at the first petition...

Holy Be Your Name...

“May your name be made holy” immediately follows the address ***“Our Father, in the heavens.”*** It is (intentionally) the first petition.

The phrase, the first petition, is a **paradox**. To ask God to make his name holy is a bit like asking wood to become solid or a fire to become hot. (Wood is already solid; fire is always hot.)

God’s name is the most holy reality there is; everything else may be unclean but the name (essence) of God is (always) **holy**. But, sadly, it can be, and often is, **defiled** by our disobedience – when we live as if our *Abba Father* is not God. And so we pray...

The root of the word “hallowed” comes from the Greek word, *hagios*, from which we get *holy* and *holiness*. It is the equivalent to the Latin, *sanctus*, from which we get *saint* and *sanctified*.

The word means, “to set apart” or, better, “to make **central**.” The latter is better because in our sense of space, it is preferable to place God at the center rather than “set apart” off to one side.

So when we pray, “*Holy be Your Name*” we’re asking God to be **first** and **central** – in the center of his world, in the center of his Church, in the center of our lives. This first petition is asking God to be first in who we are and in everything we do; i.e., God needs to be recognized as God and to be treated as God under all our skies.

In **Ezekiel 36:16-23**, Israel is told they have defiled the land by shedding blood and worshipping idols, so God drove them out of the land. God’s holiness doesn’t allow him to tolerate such wickedness. But then God’s Name was questioned (i.e., defiled) because Gentile nations now assumed the God of Israel was too weak to save his people.

“Thus says the Lord: I had a concern for my holy name which the house of Israel caused to be profaned among the nations to which they came...It is not for your sake, O house of Israel that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name...I will make holy my great name!”

God makes his own name holy!

God says, “*I will manifest my holiness among you in the sight of the nations. You shall know that I am the Lord...*” (Ezekiel 20:41f).

That is, we don’t make God’s name **holy**; God makes his own name holy by acting in powerfully in history, in his-story. This truth is underscored by the fact this phrase is in the passive.

In fact, every time in the Old Testament, the verb “*to make holy*” is used it is in the passive. God is always the (primary) actor; God, and God alone can make his name holy. No **creature** can possibly carry out such an awesome divine act!

The Name of God represents the **essence of God and the point where it is possible for us (creatures) to approach God and communicate with him.**

In biblical times, names had significance. A parent didn’t name their child after a rich uncle, wonder if the initials looked good on luggage, or had the same initial as their siblings. A name was given with the hope and expectation that the child would grow into the name, into the character the name defined, or into the legacy of those who had gone before. And, sometimes it was necessary for a name to change to better reflect the person as they grew.

Remember when Jesus first met Cephas, he found a shifty fellow; but Jesus saw something in him others didn’t see, so he called him “Rocky,” because he knew Peter would one day be like granite.

When we talk about God’s name, we’re talking about his essence, his character, his identity, his nature: he is holy! He is set apart (he is not like us!) So when we pray “*hallowed be your name,*” we’re asking that God-as-he-is and as-he has-revealed himself to be known and honored as God, and God alone.

When God confronted Moses in the burning bush, Moses insisted he be told God’s name because **Moses** understood that if you don’t know God’s name, you can’t communicate with him. (“*Hey, you...*” doesn’t work with God!)

To pray, “*make his name holy,*” affirms that God is **personal**, that he can be and **yearns** to be **known**. Revelation is always an act of God.

When a verb in the passive is connected to God, it is called the “*divine passive.*”

The Jews in Jesus’ day were careful not to use God’s name unless it was absolutely necessary; they understood and feared that a casual use of God’s name would break the **third commandment** and take God’s name in vain (Exodus 20:7). To avoid this, they **formed** a way of talking about God without

actually using his name. They substituted **Adoni** (their word for LORD) for God's name (*Yahweh*) when reading Scripture.

There are over 200 examples of Jesus using the divine passive in the Gospels: the Jews would have expected that the Rabbi Jesus would use it when teaching how to pray.

The passive voice (*hallowed be*) instead of the active voice (*hallow*) preserves God's **sovereignty**. (We do not make **demands** of God: we don't pray *hallow your name, bring your kingdom, do your will*; God is to be spoken to *indirectly*, reverently, through our **requests**.)

God is making his name holy. Initially, this sounds like an easy petition to pray because God's holiness solely rests on him. But we are also praying that we will not defile his name in any way.

Holy be our Lives

God acts to reveal himself, to make his name holy through great acts in history, to save, to redeem. His people, his community, is watching; so what does this mean for them? The world is also watching; what does this offer to them?

Because God is holy, his **people** must be holy (**Deut. 7:6; 26:18**); as we witness God's holiness, we are called and expected to honor His holiness; if we profess to follow Jesus, we are called to reflect his holiness in our daily lives.

Many of the babblings we call prayer border on blasphemy because we forget God is holy and sovereign and we treat him as if he is unloving, ignorant, easy to manipulate, and like a genie, just there to do our bidding.

Our God is a holy, holy, holy God. So this is first and foremost a reminder of who we are praying in the presence of.

This demonstration of God's holiness and our "calling" to reflect it is clearly seen in Isaiah's vision (**Isaiah 6:1-10**). **Isaiah** comes face to face with God and his holiness. He sees "*the Lord sitting upon the throne, high and lifted up.*" *Above him are seraphim, each with six wings. They cover their faces and feet and cry out, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory."*

Isaiah immediately realizes he is an unholy man dwelling among unholy people. Standing in the presence of a holy God made him acutely aware of this: "*Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!*"

But instead of making a sacrifice to reconcile himself to God, Isaiah cries out (remember it is primarily a matter of the heart) and God sends an angel to take a burning coal from the altar of sacrifice to purify him. Then God asks,

“Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Isaiah replies, *“Here am I! Send me!”*

Listen to this summary. It is a sequence designed to be **repeated** every time we consciously step into God’s presence in prayer:

Cognition: Isaiah sees and understands God is demonstrating his holiness

Confession: Isaiah is aware of our/his unholiness and cries out, confessing his sin

Cleansing: God sends an angel to purify him with fire from the altar of sacrifice

Challenge (to join God’s mission, to bring in His Kingdom): After Isaiah is purified, God challenges him, *“Whom shall I send?”* (After what God has done for us, the challenge is no longer optional).

Commitment: The purified prophet responds in obedience: *Here am I, send me!*

The holiness of God requires **purity** and **righteousness**; when our lifestyles aren’t pure and righteous, God cannot ignore their absence. And he cannot pretend that everything is right between us when everything is not right.

We can’t keep whittling God down to our size, keep trying to put him into a box we can label, keep ignoring him in our daily decisions – the big ones and the little ones, and keep trying to pressure him to do what we want him to do.

Note in the first three petitions, all pronouns that refer to us are missing; there is no “we” or “us” (and no “me” or “my” either). This is about putting God first, about his centrality in his world, his Church and our lives (we belong to him!). This is not only about recognizing God as God, this is also about living knowing God is God!

When we pray, “May your name be holy” we’re asking God to open our eyes to see his holiness, sovereignty, and awesomeness in ways Ezekiel anticipated and Isaiah personally encountered.

When we pray for God’s name to be hallowed, we are praying that we and our **neighbors** will discover the full **wonder** of God’s nature and embrace him...

...that the world will **cease** from using God’s name in ways that **defile** it.

...that we’ll look to Jesus as the **head** of His church and as **Lord** sitting on the throne of our heart.

...that God will be a God to us and **reveal** his **holiness** to us and through us.

This is no small request; because if God answers, as he will, we will be left in **silence** on our **knees**. God’s holiness requires nothing less.

God's Love and Holiness

The first two phrases of this prayer underscore the struggle with how God can be both **loving** (gracious, forgiving) and **holy** (just, requiring standards of righteousness) at the same time. It is a struggle Hosea, the prophet, knew well.

God told Hosea to marry Gomer, a woman with an immoral lifestyle (1:2). Hosea does; they end up with three children; after the third one is born, Hosea discovers the last two are not his. Gomer then leaves Hosea and returns to her life of prostitution, presumably in the temple of Baal. When her usefulness comes to an end, Hosea finds her up for sale. He buys her and takes her back home with him.

To renew his covenant with her, Hosea realizes the principles of righteousness and justice must permeate their relationship; her past behavior cannot continue, or the relationship won't survive. Justice requires she be stoned to death.

Hosea doesn't want her stoned; he longs for a relationship filled with love and grace where the past is forgiven, and a new life begins.

He puts his realities together: "*I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy."* (2:19).

How can it be both ways: righteousness and love; justice and mercy? Hosea's story is a metaphor of the divine relationship between God and his people. Hosea experiences the agony of rejected love and tastes a bit of God's divine agony as God deals with his wayward children.

God is holy love, and he faces our unholy nature. Yet in his holiness, God is able to reach out to love the unholy and "buy" us back. The greatest need in our world today is for people know the **God** who is **God**.

In the story of Jesus, the **cross** offers a more perfect resolution to this agony. On the cross, **justice** is **served**. On the cross, ultimate, unqualified **love** is **demonstrated**. God's justice is satisfied by his love.

Rabbis of Jesus' day were reported to have stood in silence for a full hour before beginning to pray. They understood God's holiness. Refraining from words quietly for a few minutes would prepare us well to pray these profound words.

Our Abba in the heavens, holy be your Name...