

"Seeking God"

A communion meditation based on

Matthew 6:5-15; Didache 8:2b-3; Luke 11:1-13

March 7, 2010

Redlands United Church of Christ

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We've all heard the joke about the little child who comes home from church, runs up to her parent and blurts out, "I know God's name and it's Harold..." The parent stifles a laugh, asks the obvious question, "And how do you know that, sweetie?" In church today, the minister said, "Our Father, who art in heaven, Harold be thy name..."

By any name, "holy"—"hallowed"—is difficult to swallow. Holy is out there somewhere... Holy is above and beyond... Holy is so big that some religious leaders say we shouldn't even try to understand it...

Holy...Hallowed...Holiness...it is not only what we are urged to call God, but the concept of holiness undergirds the entire Lord's Prayer.

The core meaning of all three versions of the prayer is the same: treat your neighbors and their needs as holy, that is, strive to fulfill their needs as if you are serving God. The first word of the prayer—"OUR"—is our first clue that our acknowledgement of God's holiness is supposed to lead us to live as if those we meet are holy, too. Note that the prayer does not begin with "my father" or "my God." Missing are the instructions to pray for personal concerns. In no sense was this to be an individual prayer. Private, maybe, but never individual, never for one's own needs alone. In fact, as author and biblical scholar Obery Hendricks points out, "there are no individual petitions anywhere in the Lord's Prayer; it is always 'our' or 'us' or 'we.'"

In this way Jesus makes certain to focus the disciples' gaze not on their personal circumstances, but on the plight of their people."

Several years ago, in an attempt to be more inclusive in my public worship language, I started leading the Lord's Prayer with the words "Our God..." rather than "Our Father..." Within a few weeks, and to my surprise, most of the congregation started using the same non-gender-specific language. In my study of the prayer for this series, I have come to think we kept the most important part of that two-word phrase. Whatever name we each use to call on the Divine, what is most important is that, in worship, we call on the Divine together, as one community of faith, one body of believers. And when we use the Lord's Prayer in our private praying—apart from this sanctuary—the "our" and "we" and "us" language is an essential reminder that none of us are ever absent from community, at least not in God's eyes.

After we have prayed to "Our God," the original versions of the prayer all instruct us to pray, "Hallow your name," or "Sanctify your name." In Roman state religion of the first century, only Caesar's name was to be hallowed. One of Caesar's Greek titles was actually "Savior." So to call God—and especially the God of a radical itinerant preacher and healer killed by the Romans—to call that God "holy", was an act of rebellion against the state. It was to say that God is holy and Caesar is not. To do so, within the context of a public prayer, was to bravely demonstrate your own dedication to God's holiness being lived out or embodied in your own life.

Further, given that the prayer originated in the world of Jewish spirituality, the early people praying this prayer would have inextricably linked God's holiness with God's promised judgment against injustice. In the Hebrew scriptures, the holiness of God's name is regularly linked to Israel's liberation from one oppressor or another. So the holiness of God, in scripture,

is not simply a matter of belief or faith. To call God holy is a call to action, and action especially on behalf of the oppressed.

Today, we lose much of the punch of these declarations...and yet, while our lives are not at risk for publicly stating God's holiness, our reputations might be. What would your life look like, for example, if you stood up for God's holiness, and thus God's sense of justice the next time someone is pink-slipped? Or if you spoke on behalf of justice at the next staff meeting? Or at the family reunion when injustice comes in the form of heartless and cruel jokes? Beyond the praying of this prayer—that God's name will be honored as holy, sacred, sanctified—there is a whole world waiting for the realm of God to become real. And you—and I—are its necessary ambassadors. The manifestation of God's holiness, the arrival of God's kingdom, the enacting of God's will all mean the same in this context. Caesar's kingdom must go. Caesar's will can no longer be allowed to rule. For it is a spiritual law, as well as good common sense, that two kingdoms cannot exist in the same space, and no two competing sets of laws, edicts, and judgments can rule simultaneously. As Jesus tells us elsewhere, no one can serve two masters.

Today, at this table, we enter into the holy. At this table, a seeking God seeks each one of us. That seeking God nourishes us, sustains us, and strengthens us for the journey into justice, which is just another way to declare that God is holy... hallowed...and that's really not so difficult to understand after all.