

## **Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany**

February 1, 2015

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown, MD

Reading: Matthew 6: 7-21

*Grace and peace to you from God – Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen*

There is great freedom at a Youth event like the one you helped seven teens, one junior adviser, two adult advisers and me attend last weekend in Pittsburgh. Much time is spent in worship. Each session of praise will have a lot of music and a talk by the weekend presenter. That may not sound much different than our weekly worship but it is. People jump, sway, pump the air, sing at the top of their lungs and dance ---- and no one looks at you as if you're weird. When the presenter talks, there's laughter, "ahhhh's," some "Amen's" and niggling questions you want to discuss with your church group. The prayers that are offered are devoid of any pomp or flowery church language — they are simple, heartfelt conversation with God about what is milling around the hearts and heads of the "pray-er" and the gathered community. It's all very refreshing and a bit unnerving at the same time. You're free to engage in worship with fewer restraints, with your emotions as well as your head. And you're also free to get so drawn into the crowd and fun that you might forget it's about God not us .... except that the worship team leaders do such a good job of always reminding us that we are about glorifying our amazing Lord who loves us so completely.

Jesus has something to say about our religious practices beyond any labels like traditional, contemporary, youth event, contemplative, dynamic. In this chapter of Matthew, Jesus mentions three expressions of faith he expects his disciples to practice — charitable giving (called almsgiving), prayer and fasting. In each instance, Jesus says check out the motives behind your actions. The issue is not whether you pray aloud or silently, whether you wear ashes on Ash Wednesday or not, or if someone knows how much of your income you give to the church and charitable causes. The issue is whether our motives for giving, praying or fasting is to get the praise and admiration of others for yourself. In that case, our "holy" motions have become about us, not God. God isn't fooled, Jesus says, and we shouldn't be either. Jesus raises the danger flag. Religious disciplines like prayer, fasting and fearless generosity are meant to help us grow in our love and trust of God. It's not about show but honoring God with all that we do. These are the treasures that will not be consumed by moths or rust.

In the very middle of the sermon on the Mount, Jesus spends some time teaching about prayer. "Don't heap up empty phrases," Jesus says. Prayer isn't playing a slot machine: put in the right kind and number of words and ---- ding, ding, ding ---- God will

give you what you want. Jesus tells us no matter the number or quality of our words, the Father knows what we need before we ask. Now that might lead us to wonder, “Why pray since God already knows what we need?” Yet right then Jesus offers a model for prayer — telling us clearly that prayer **is** important. Prayer **does** serve the holy, life-giving purpose of honoring God AND drawing us into God’s will for us and all of creation. The Lord’s Prayer is a model for that kind of prayer that serves that kind of purpose. What are the pieces of this model prayer we are to use in our own prayer lives?

Look at it with me on page 8 of the bulletin. Read the first two lines with me: “Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.” Jesus tells us to address the Almighty God the way he does ---- “Father.” Jesus is telling us we have a loving, intimate relationship with God like he does. We may start prayers, “Oh, holy, Almighty, all powerful, all knowing God, worthy of all glory and honor” and those words are true. But Jesus invites us to say, “Our Father” or more correctly translated, “Our Daddy,” Can you hear the difference? “Father, authority and provider, can I speak with you ” and “Dad, can we talk?” From the start, Jesus wants us to know that prayer is about a relationship — our relationship with a God who wants a loving, close relationship with us. And that God is not far, far away up there, busy and disinterested. God is right here.... with us.... ready and delighted to share each and every moment we offer. Heaven is not a geographical designation but wherever God reigns, where God and God’s will rules. In prayer, as the Irish describe it, we find one of those thin places where heaven and earth seem to touch. Our Father who art in heaven, blessed and holy are you and your name.

Look at the prayer again. Start at “give us this day and read through “deliver us from evil.” Notice the pronouns used by the pray-er. “OUR Father... give US... Forgive US... and lead US not... deliver US” All plural. Listen to what happens if we change it to first person, singular: “My Father....give me this day my daily bread... forgive me my trespasses as I forgive those..... and lead me not into temptation but deliver me from evil.” There is nothing wrong with it but that’s not how Jesus taught it. When we pray ---- by ourselves or with others --- we are to remember that we are in a relationship with God AND one another.... we are part of God’s family.... we are brothers and sisters... we are not alone nor isolated from the concerns and lives of others. It’s not just “my daily bread” but food for all who are hungry. We pray not only that I can forgive but all of us can. We pray that we all can resist the temptation to follow the adversary rather than God. It’s not that God doesn’t care about you individually. It’s that God loves each of us dearly AND we’re to care for our brothers and sisters who God also loves dearly. In prayer we express a relationship with God and a relationship with our neighbor, too.

Yes, I skipped over a part. Read that first complete sentence with me, “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” I had the honor of attending the funeral service for Kyle McKoy yesterday. Kyle was 26-year old young man, whose family once participated here at Haven. He died from the same tragic, unpredictable asthmatic episode as his mother. Many of you watched Kyle grow up here. His father, Brett McKoy, a police officer and the pastor of Cutting Edge Ministries, preached at his son’s funeral. He spoke of the many well-meaning things said at a time like this to try to help. We don’t like to feel out of control, he said, and so we try to make sense of things. Brett pointed to the coffin and said he was clear about this, “God did not take my son.” Instead, he said it was the work of the evil one, the adversary whose work it is to try to drive a wedge between us and God and isn’t above using senseless death as a weapon.

You know what else I heard Brett saying? I hear him saying, this is NOT God’s will. In the place where God rules, where God’s will reigns a young man doesn’t die like this. Asthma, disease, drunk drivers, abuse, terrorism, racism, starvation, homelessness, all that rob people of life, that is NOT the world as God wants it, that is NOT God’s will. Jesus gave us the walking, breathing picture of the world as God wants it — it’s the Kingdom of God where the hungry are fed, demons and disease are dismissed, forgiveness is prized, violence is banished and no one is left out of the party unless they want to be. THAT’S God’s will and it should be that way on earth, too, but it isn’t YET. So we pray. We pray deeply and often that the will of God’s will come to reign here instead of sin and evil. YOUR kingdom come, YOUR will be done is also our plea that God help us do our part to make it so. Help us to help you, Lord, provide daily bread to all who are hungry. Help us to help you, Lord, bring the reconciliation, unity and peace of forgiveness. Help us, Lord, to recognize and avoid killer temptation and evil so we can help you to warn others and call them into the light of your love and grace.

Why pray if God knows what we need? Because WE need that living relationship with our “Daddy” who wants the very best for each of us and all God’s creation. We need to pray because WE need to be reminded that we are not alone in this faith of ours and God cares about every single person in this world. We need to pray because WE need to remember we are part of God’s movement to transform “earth as it is in heaven” and that will only happen if we allow God to work through us. Together or alone, prayer is a life line to the source of all life that helps free us of our narrow, human understanding and instead, helps us keep focused on God’s greater love and future.

We didn't say the Lord's Prayer last weekend in Pittsburgh but I heard the Lord's Prayer in it's message --- Be the unique, beloved children of God we are and take God's love and ways back into our homes and schools and lives because that is how God can change the world. We didn't say the Lord's Prayer during the funeral service but I heard it when Brett announced that worship would not be about death but life, the life we have in Christ that flows into our living with one another. Brett said what would help him and his family the most right now is to know everyone who loved Kyle knows and loves the Lord. Lord remember us in your kingdom and teach us to pray, directing our concern to God, ourselves and our neighbor and for the strength to care for all three as you would want.<sup>1</sup> It's that simple and that profound and that important. Amen.

Linda M Alessandri 1/31/15

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1. David Lose, posted on "Daily Bread" Feb. 17, 2014