

**Don't Mess With The Lord's Prayer!**  
Sermon on Luke 11: 1-4 & Matthew 6:9-13  
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Trinity United, Ottawa  
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I've been told not to mess with The Lord's Prayer. So I won't... "*Abwoon d'bwashmaya, Nethqadash shmakh, Teytey malkuthakh...*" That's as close as I can get to the prayer that Jesus is reported in our Gospels to have given to his disciples. Those are the words that have been remembered and recited and relayed, edited, transcribed and translated a thousand ways over two millennia, making their way down to us in English as 'Our Father who art in heaven...' This is our Psalm of Jesus, the only prayer that most of us actually know 'by heart.' Precious words in any language - and such potentially powerful words among Christians that we cannot afford to take them 'in vain.'

It is so easy to just 'say' The Lord's Prayer, rather than pray it. But if we merely mumble it without feeling or meaning, we waste too much! We miss out on reviewing and renewing in our own lives Jesus' prescription for peace - inner peace, peace among us, and peace in our world..

I grew up mumbling The Lord's Prayer at school and church, as required. And I never gave it much thought until I came back to church and discovered that I didn't like saying it. God as Father? How patriarchal! Kingdom come. That would be a step back from democracy I thought - so I hope not! Nursing my literal minded disputes, I'd just stay quiet while others said it.

When I was so soon called to ministry, my honest and baffled prayer was: 'God, how can I possibly be a Minister if I can't say the one set prayer in our tradition with passion and integrity?' Then one day, sitting in my first Christian Spirituality class at St. Pauls University, I suddenly wrote out a prayer with very familiar rhythms. It came in the 'inspired' way that writers and musicians know, pouring

onto the page without thought or delay. Somehow just there. A prayer to answer my prayer.

Dear Creator,  
in and of us,  
holy are all your names.  
Your vision come,  
your love be done on earth  
'till its living heaven.  
Give us today's sustaining bread  
and celebrate our growing  
as we forgive ourselves and others.  
Lead us into compassion  
and deliver us from complacency  
for we belong to your Creation  
divine and glorious,  
forever becoming...  
Amen.

At first I naively thought that it was a substitute for the Lord's Prayer, but I came to realize that it was just a personal invitation - to find my own meaning and integrity in the one prayer we all can share. It lifted me out of my literal-minded arguments with the "Our Father" and started me exploring its profound message of peace and the mystical pastoral impact of our shared prayer.

I have come to so love The Lord's Prayer. This book "Prayers of the Cosmos: Meditations on the Aramaic Words of Jesus" was a key discovery for me. It offers a smorgasbord of images for each line of the prayer, to express the multi-layered meanings in Jesus' Aramaic language. Take the 'forgive us our trespasses' line and pick from these:

Loose the cords of mistakes binding us, as we release the strands we hold of others' guilt.

or

Erase the inner marks our failures make, just as we scrub our hearts of others' faults.

or

Lighten our load of secret debts, as we relieve others of their need to repay.

Have you got a richer sense now of what all that 'debt' or 'trespass' stuff was really about?

The layers of meanings liberate us to find our new meaning in the words of our shared prayer. To take on the line that resonates with our reality right now and make it our heartfelt prayer for today. Even to change a word or two to make it our own.

Sometimes you hear me start my prayer "Our Mother, Our Father". The 'our Father' address God was Jesus' way of expressing intimacy with God. His word 'Abba' - was his daddy image, a personification of unconditional parental love you can rely on. Someone he could really talk to. So God can just as well be a mother figure, can't she, if that helps us some of us get personal with her?

While I was delving into the meaning of the words of the prayer, I was also 'practising' it while learning pastoral caring. I was advised to offer The Lord's Prayer in the middle of a visit - not at the end. Because, as I discovered, closing our eyes together and hearing our voices weaving these words, we often create a safe and sacred space that our souls recognize. Perhaps because the words take us back to childhood? Perhaps because they bring back the beloved ones who once said it with us? Perhaps because we feel we are safe with Jesus? Whatever the reason, often, after saying this prayer, we find ourselves naturally sharing our deepest concerns and censored feelings. The stuff we would otherwise hold inside, denying

it the telling that is so healing. It is part of the mystery for me, how The Lord's Prayer introduces so many of the most tender and privileged moments of my ministry.

Then there is the collective power of the Lord's prayer - how in joining our voices it can encourage and empower us to change ourselves and our world into Jesus' way. When we make the words meaningful and personal, sharing them can transport us together to that Kingdom of God's rule on earth where we are all deeply loved and each receive the sustaining bread we need. Blessed security, inclusive kinship, where forgiveness flows in all directions and compassion ultimately defeats greed.

The Lord's prayer is a vision we can all enter into together for a few moments, reminding us that we are among legion who regularly invite the power of God's love to enlarge our vision and steer our lives into action. Saying The Lord's Prayer is meant to strengthen us to live the Kingdom vision, to feel our power in vast numbers and through all ages, so that we act in genuine expectation that our world can look more like it.

The "forever and ever", by the way, was real poetic license by the poets who wrote our traditional King James Version of the Bible. A better translation from the early Aramaic prayer expresses this line as "until we meet again.". We are meant to get together and keep saying this prayer - until Kingdom comes!

And the Amen at the end? Its not just punctuation. In the ancient Middle East, 'Amen' was the solemn oath that sealed agreements. Like a signature or handshake - it is the promise to 'make it so. A commitment - to keep talking to our Abba God in prayer and to keep encouraging each other to follow Jesus' prescription for peace.

Thy Kingdom come! Our kin-dom come! On earth till its living heaven. Amen!