

**Rev. Dr. Bill Smutz**  
**“ Who Is/Art In Heaven”**  
**First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood**  
**Sunday, July 11, 2021**

***Exodus 3:13-15***

*But Moses said to God, ‘If I come to the Israelites and say to them, “The God of your ancestors has sent me to you”, and they ask me, “What is his name?” what shall I say to them?’ God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM.’ He said further, ‘Thus you shall say to the Israelites, “I AM has sent me to you.” ’ God also said to Moses, ‘Thus you shall say to the Israelites, “The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you”’: This is my name for ever, and this my title for all generations.*

***Matthew 6:9***

*‘Pray then in this way:  
Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name.*

Names are important in scripture. By which I mean we who read scripture so that we can better understand how we are to live as children of God and disciples of Jesus, we who read scripture need to pay attention to how people are named, and how names are used. Does a particular scripture tell us who gives someone their name? Is God the naming source? Is an enemy the naming source? Does a person's name have theological meaning like the child born to the young woman whom the prophet Isaiah names Emmanuel, meaning God with us? What does it mean when someone is only referred to by their gender or country of origin or both like the Shunammite woman who cares for Elisha or the Samaritan woman with whom Jesus speaks at the village well in the middle of the day?

And we really, really need to pay attention to scripture stories about names when the name in question belongs to God like in our Exodus story today. Our brief lesson from Exodus which describes a tense back and forth between God and Moses has implications for understanding the person and nature of God, even today, and so commands our attention. God summons Moses by speaking through the burning bush, that bush which is on fire but is not consumed. God wants Moses to return to Egypt and command Pharaoh to release God's people, Israel, from bondage and slavery. Moses is willing to go but wants to know the name of the God on whose behalf he is going to confront the all-powerful pharaoh. God says a name isn't really that important and promises to be with Moses and never to abandon him. But Moses insists, insists that no one, especially Pharaoh, will pay him any attention if he shows up making demands on behalf of some nameless God.

Behind this curious tug of war is the ancient belief common in Moses' day that to know one's name was to have some power, some control over them. God seeks to remain a bit mysterious, unbound by human knowing while Moses persists that he can do nothing without a proper name for the God he will represent. The impasse is resolved when God offers a form of the verb "to be" as the divine name. "Tell them I am who I am or I will be who I will be has sent you. This self-naming from God seems to satisfy all needs. Moses can tell Pharaoh exactly who has sent him while God retains a necessary air of control and mystery. This exchange concerning God's name in Exodus sets a tone and a direction for speaking about and naming God,

which remains important to us today, for this story reminds us that God's identity is controlled by God alone and that even our most familiar names for God are our best loved names for God. They all fail to capture the totality and the mystery and the holiness of God's identity. We also learn here that we must be comfortable with the gap, the gap between God's sovereignty and our desire for control. God will ever be God despite what we want. Jumping now to the Lord's Prayer, which is the focus of our July sermons, Jesus clearly and intentionally names God as father. We need to note, however, that Jesus's use of this word, Jesus's use of father is that of a title rather than a formal name, for in Jesus Day, speaking of God as father indicates the closeness of the relationship Jesus feels with God. The title father describes three important things about God. First, it describes God's compassion. Second, it points to God's parental relationship with all people everywhere who exist as one family, one family in God's creation. And third, this title lifts up the human need to be faithful to one another in imitation of God's faithfulness to us. In a patriarchal society, calling God father is much the same, I believe, as calling God I am who I am, for this title allows Jesus to emphasize the loving and saving aspects of God while retaining a bit of God's mystery, while retaining God's control over God's person and name. We would be remiss, however, if we did not try and push our understanding of God as named in our lesson today, if we did not try and push this name of God a bit further, by recognizing that there are also political implications to Jesus's use of the word father in describing God and especially his description of the father who dwells in heaven. Israel in Jesus' day existed under Roman occupation. And thanks to the Roman Senate, one of the official titles of the Roman Emperor Caesar, was *Pater Patrae*, I hope the Latin's even close but that's Latin meaning for father of the fatherland. The poet Ovid, picking up on this phrase, father of the fatherland, describes Caesar Augustus in this way, "Thou bears on Earth, the name which Jupiter bears in heaven. Of men, thou art father, he of the gods. New Testament scholar Amy Jill Levine says when the followers of Jesus talk about their father in heaven, they are making a political statement. Jesus wants his disciples to be clear. The Father of the fatherland is not the ultimate authority on Earth, is not the ultimate authority for their lives. The ultimate authority for disciples belongs exclusively to the father in the heavens.

During my time in professional ministry, I have repeatedly found that many of we modern-day disciples want to separate the gospel of Jesus from the realities of everyday life, especially the political aspects of our existence. We want Jesus to be about faith alone and nothing else. More than one church member has told me over the years, often with a hint of anger in their voice, that there is no place for politics in the church. And while the Lord's Prayer is probably the last place we would expect Jesus to be political, we need to pause here and recognize Jesus boldness as well as his understanding of the political realities surrounding him and his disciples for to invite disciples to pray and hold highest allegiance for the father of the heavens rather than the father of the fatherland as the Empire would desire and command its subjects to do so, to pray for the father in the heavens is an audaciously political invitation. Jesus is very clear in his own mind and heart and faithfulness that God is the Lord of all creation and that there is no human being and no other god, who deserves or who is worthy of human allegiance.

I believe the Romans crucified Jesus in large part because they were scared, terrified of his ideas and scared that his followers believed him, believed these ideas, scared that his disciples embraced the belief that the father in the heavens is more powerful and thus more consequential than the father of the fatherlands. We would do well, I believe, as disciples to follow Jesus in thinking politically about our praying of the Lord's Prayer. But let us beware of this thinking for such thinking requires that we ask ourselves tough questions, questions that we must then answer, questions like are there human rulers and earthly powers that we flirt with placing above the Father of the heavens in our lives, today? Is our embrace of these powers sometimes more than mere flirtation? What does Jesus have to say about how enamored we humans can become, have become, or are in the midst of becoming by things like money or by media might as represented by Google and Apple and Amazon or by political ideologues who pretend to care about the welfare of others but are only about enriching themselves?

In this prayer, Jesus teaches us to care about and work for and live in a world that is totally attuned to God's purposes and

priorities. Even 2000 years later, Jesus is still preaching to us, still inviting us to pray about the political dimensions of the priorities of God. So, what we do with all of this-- for matters of gender and politics and inclusivity were at play when Jesus first taught disciples this prayer. And these same manners remain, I believe, important realities for disciples who pray this prayer today. What do we do with the reality that all of our names for God fall short of capturing the essence of God's glory? And what do we do with the reality that even our most faithful and flattering names for God will never allow us any measure of control over God? And what do we do with the reality that this prayer, which most of us have known since childhood and can rattle off from memory--what do we do with the reality that this prayer had political overtones at its inception and continues to have these same overtones for disciples today? What do we do?

I have three thoughts, and I trust that you will have other thoughts as well. Hopefully, we can share them one with another. First thought, it is imperative that we keep praying this prayer, for Jesus instructs us to pray this way. Disciples have followed this instruction for about 2,000 years now. We cannot and should not stop. Second, we must let the Holy Spirit guide our praying, for the Spirit can and will invite us to pray this prayer in new and surprising ways that allow this prayer to continue making sense to us as disciples that allow us to continue addressing the present day needs and realities of the world. The spirit might lead us to pray this prayer in the singular rather than the plural. The spirit might push us to address God with more inclusive words and images: our eternal spirit, our earth maker, our pain bearer, our life giver. The Holy Spirit will always surprise us-- always surprises in ways that we can never begin to imagine, and so we must be open to how the spirit is inviting us to pray this prayer.

Third, we must always remember that our primary allegiance as disciples is to God. We can and do love our families. We can and do love our church. We can and do love our country. But first and last and always, we pray to the one who is above all earthly authority, the one who creates us, the one who continually makes a difference for us, the one who in love sent us Jesus Christ, that we might know how to love and care for each other and all others. Jesus calls us to see and understand God as nothing less, and so we must.

For our spiritual homework this week, I invite us all to take a little time each day and pray the Lord's Prayer but pray it using a new image for God and pray it embracing a deeper understanding of God's authority. And pray this prayer in such a way that we leave some time and silence to listen for what God is saying to us, to listen for how God is engaging us. This prayer has been challenging and transforming the lives of Jesus disciples for nearly 2,000 years now. Let us embrace our place in this long and holy line of disciples. Let us pray and always be open to God's response. Amen.