

THE LORD'S PRAYER REVISITED

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper

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The inauguration ceremony for Barack Obama was a joyous occasion for many people, but it also included some awkward moments. One of them was the flubbing of the oath of office by Chief Justice John Roberts. The other was the offering of the Lord's Prayer by Pastor Rick Warren, which some people considered to be an unwelcome intrusion of a particular religious expression into a public ceremony. What most people call the Lord's Prayer is itself a classic example of how religious traditions evolve. Although the majority of Christians believe that the words of this prayer originated with Jesus, it is a nearly word-for-word duplicate of the Jewish Kaddish ("KAY-dish"), which is recited in synagogue services and by mourners after the death of a close relative. No doubt Jesus learned it during his childhood instruction in the local temple, and later passed it along to his disciples when they asked him how to pray.

This prayer appears in only two of the four Gospels, Matthew and Luke, and their versions of it differ, with Luke's version (11:2-4) being much shorter than the version in Matthew (6:9-13), which is the one usually recited as "the" Lord's Prayer. Neither of these Bible versions includes the final sentence, "For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever," which was added much later as a result of its use in the liturgy of the early church." [http://www.thenazareneway.com/lords_prayer.htm, p. 3] One final irony about the widespread use of the Lord's Prayer at public gatherings is the scriptural account that right before teaching his disciples this prayer, Jesus admonished them, "When you pray, go into a room by yourself, shut the door, pray to your Father who is there in the secret place . . ." [Matt. 6:6] What a far cry from reciting it in front of millions of people at a presidential inauguration!

The most popular version of the Lord's Prayer is taken from the King James Version of Matthew, which is a translation into 17th-century English of a Latin translation of a Greek translation of the original language spoken by Jesus and his followers: **Aramaic**. According to biblical scholar Neil Douglas-Klotz, "Unlike Greek, Aramaic does not draw sharp lines between means and ends, or between an inner quality and an outer action. Both are always present. When Jesus refers to 'the kingdom of heaven,' this kingdom is always both *within* and *among* us. Likewise, 'neighbor' is both inside and outside, as is the 'self' that we are to love to the same degree as our 'neighbor.' Unlike Greek, Aramaic presents a fluid and holistic view of the cosmos. The same [Aramaic] word may be translated as 'name,' 'light,' 'sound,' or 'experience.'" [Neil Douglas-Klotz, *Prayers of the Cosmos*, pp. 2-3]

This helps us appreciate all the more the **deliberately ambiguous** meaning of many of Jesus' parables and sayings, which lend themselves to a variety of interpretations. Here is Douglas-Klotz's re-interpreted translation of the Lord's Prayer based on the Aramaic language in which it was originally spoken:

O Birther! Father-Mother of the Cosmos, focus your light within us—make it useful:
Create your reign of unity now—your one desire then acts with ours, as in all light, so in
all forms. Grant what we need each day in bread and insight. Loose the cords of

image for expressing our understanding of the Ultimate. Some UU ministers solve this problem in opening their public prayers by listing the many different names by which the sacred is known in different faith traditions. My own approach is to keep it simple, and so I often start with “Spirit of Life and Love,” realizing that for some this phrase may sound too vague and impersonal. Some people are offended by the use of the word “God”—even in a prayer! At other times, I sidestep the thorny issue of naming the “addressee” altogether, and begin by calling attention to the group itself: “We are gathered here” For me, the main purpose of a spoken prayer is not to make a theological statement, but to **forge a sense of connection**—connection with one another as well as connection with the most inclusive reality we can imagine.

I hope I have helped broaden your understanding of what “prayer” can mean. Fredric Muir, who is minister of the UU congregation in Annapolis, Maryland says, “Life can be a prayer, but only if you maintain a sense of awareness of what’s going on. If you blindly walk through your days and weeks, your relationships and private moments without giving them any thought, context, or grounding—any centering—then there won’t be any sense of prayer to life. When you look at your life as a prayer, all of its events and people, when you hold these up for reflection and comment in a deliberate and focused kind of way, so that you’re aware of what you’re doing, then you’re praying.” [*Heretics’ Faith*, p. 160] Let me close with a prayer by the poet Alla Renée Bozarth:

Be awake to the Life that is loving you
 and sing your prayer, laugh your prayer, dance your prayer,
 run and weep and sweat your prayer, sleep your prayer, eat your prayer,
 paint, sculpt, hammer and read your prayer, sweep, dig, rake, drive and hoe your prayer,
 wash, iron, vacuum, sew, embroider and pickle your prayer,
 compute, touch, bend and fold but never delete or mutilate your prayer.
 Learn and play your prayer, work and rest your prayer, fast and feast your prayer,
 argue, talk, whisper, listen and shout your prayer,
 groan and moan and spit and sneeze your prayer,
 swim and hunt and cook your prayer,
 digest and become your prayer,
 release and recover your prayer,
 breathe your prayer,
 be your prayer.

[Alla Renée Bozarth, in Elizabeth Roberts and Elias Amidon (eds.), *Life Prayers*, xxii-xxiii]