

**The Lord's Prayer: Hallowed be thy Name**  
*Sermon preached by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt*  
*Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA*  
*July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2010*

*Exodus 3:13-15, Deuteronomy 5:11, I Peter 2:9-10*

Today I continue my sermon series on the Lord's Prayer and what we can learn from it about how to pray by looking at the phrase "Hallowed be Thy Name." Hallowed be thy name, of course, follows right on the heels of "Our Father in Heaven." Last week's sermon on that phrase focused on how the One Jesus taught the disciples to address as Our Father, is *our* God (which is both a way to acknowledge our investment in our relationship with God and, I maintain, a way to state our connection with one another, with all humanity and, indeed, the whole created order).

To pray *our* Father is also to acknowledge that we are not isolated individuals but part of a larger Christian and human community. To pray our Father *in heaven* is to bear witness to the fact that God is not just within us and beside us, but also *beyond* us somehow and beyond our manipulation. Heaven, in my view, is not so much some geographical location as it is a way to conceive of a reality toward which we aspire, to which we ultimately belong, in which we know God's presence, and out of which God challenges us and comforts us. It is a way to name a reality that is somehow beyond us. There is a "*beyondness*," a transcendence, to God - in addition to a "besideness" and "withinness" (or immanence) to God.

When Jesus taught his disciples to pray "Hallowed be thy name," he was, as a good Jew, teaching them to have respect for the transcendence, the beyondness, of God - and to do that by treating God's name as holy - set apart, special. Our first Old Testament passage is from the book of Exodus, the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter. It is a part of the story of Moses encountering God in the burning bush. Listen for what Moses learns about God's name. *Read Exodus here.*

Our second Old Testament passage is from the fifth chapter of the book of Deuteronomy. This is second time in the Torah, or the first five books of the Bible, in which the Ten Commandments are listed. I'll read just one verse, one commandment. Listen for what it says about God's name, and how we should treat it. *Read Deuteronomy here.*

Rather than reading Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer today, I'd like to share another New Testament passage, this one from I Peter 2:9-10. You may recognize it as a passage that is read at every baptism we do here at Immanuel. Thought it is not a text about God's name, per se, it does speak to how people who treat God's name as holy have a responsibility to be holy themselves. *Read I Peter here.*

The second full phrase of the Lord's Prayer has occasioned a lot of confusion in children who hear and learn to recite it. We tend to say the words so quickly and often so unthinkingly, and we so rarely pause to explain them, that it is not surprising that their little ears hear something different than what we are really saying. For instance, more than one little child, when asked to tell God's name, has replied, "Oh, that's easy. God's name is Howard." When queried as to why they give this answer, the children will respond. "Don't we pray, Howard be thy name?" I know of one little girl, who is now retirement age, who for the longest time thought God's name was Halibut (which is how her young ears heard *hallowed*.) I think that is kind of fishy... But seriously, while we laugh at those mishearings, most of us adults probably don't think much about what we are saying when we pray, "Hallowed be thy name."

When we pray “Hallowed be thy name,” we are not saying that God’s proper name is “Hallowed.” We are saying that God’s name is and should be treated as holy. To hallow something is to treat it as holy, to set it apart, to hold it in reverence and awe. It is not to treat it casually.

Names were extremely important to the ancient Israelites. They understood names not simply as honorifics or titles. They understood them to sum up the character and the nature of a person. I think, at our best, we have the same kind of approach to names. A couple of weeks ago I was at the hospital with Ryan and Betsy Bensten, after their third child was born. They told me that they didn’t have a name ready to assign the child before she was born. They wanted to wait and see the baby before they gave her name. So when they looked at the baby they thought, “This is an Alexis. Alexis Anderson Bensten, or Lexi.” They wanted to make sure the name fit her. It is hard to know if a name will fit a child when they are named that young, but those of you who have felt saddled your whole life long with a name that didn’t fit you can understand the importance of that decision.

Then there is a sense in which people can grow into their names. I think about the twins that were born earlier this week to Rob and Aly Lehman. Their names Tyler Denton and Avery Grace are names to grow into. Denton: the name of Tyler’s great-grandfather, a remarkable man. Grace: what else should any of us grow into but grace?

People can indeed grow into their names. For instance, my name in Hebrew means, “A high mountain.” Now, I’ve known little Aarons before, so there is no guarantee just by getting the name Aaron I would have grown tall and large, but the “High Mountain” name is not just about physical stature. It is about reaching for the heights, doing my best. A name.

When Moses first encounters the God of his ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in a bush that is afire with the Divine Presence, and is commissioned to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt, he asks God for God’s name. And the voice from the bush responds, “*I am who I am. If the people ask you who sent you, tell them, ‘I am has sent me.’*”

According to a number of scholars that phrase, in Hebrew, *ehyeh asher ehyeh*, or “*I am that I am*,” is just as appropriately rendered, “I will be what I will be,” or “I will become what I will become,” or even, “I am going to do whatever I please.” In other words, God is saying, in revealing God’s name, “I am beyond your manipulation. I am beyond your control. I am the One who calls you and works through you. I am God and you are not. I am that I am.”

Over time, the word *ehyeh asher ehyeh* became rendered simply *Yahweh*. Good Jews even today don’t use that word. It is too holy to even invoke. So they speak of the Lord, or God, or the Most High. But to say the word *Yahweh* is to tread on holy ground. They hallow the name. To say that God’s name is hallowed or holy is in part to say that God’s name and character are beyond our manipulation. The word holy actually means set apart, different.

So how do we hallow God’s name? The first thing to say is that we don’t treat the name casually. It is not a word to be thrown around, God. When we say the name God we should do it carefully and reverently.

The second thing to say about hallowing God’s name is that we should take care not to misuse the name by, for instance, employing it as a rubber stamp for what we have already decided we are going to do, or using it as support for our own prejudices or preconceived notions. We certainly should never use it in a jingoistic fashion or to say that God supports everything: one nation, or one political party, or one group in a political party happens to espouse. It is very important to not misuse the name of God.

I think a classic contemporary case of misusing the name of God is the Westboro Baptist Church in Kansas. Do you know this group? They are led by Fred Phelps. They show up at military funerals with signs that say things like, “God hates fags,” and “God is punishing America.” That is a classic example of misusing the name of God. I think, perhaps, the Westboro Baptist people are doing this in a misguided attempt to somehow be holy, but that makes no sense in light of how I understand God’s holiness.

This brings us to a third way to hallow the name of God. That way is to seek to live up to the name. If we are people who are associated in some way with God’s name, then shouldn’t we somehow try to live up to that name?

My Grandmother Eickstaedt had one big expectation for her family. It was this: don’t ever do anything to bring dishonor to the name Eickstaedt. What if we thought of our Christian faith in the same way? Don’t ever do anything that would bring dishonor to the name Christ, or Jesus, or God. To live in that way is to recognize that we are called to live holy lives, to conduct our lives in a way that brings honor to God by reflecting who God is and who God has called us to be. I love what Eugene Peterson writes about holiness in a coffee table book he collaborated on with a watercolor artist. It is a book of definitions and visual illustrations of words having to do with our faith. This is how he defines holiness in that book:

*Life is messy. Some of the mess is made by others, but each of us is responsible for a good bit of it on our own through our indecisiveness, our sloppy moral housekeeping, our groveling in the muck of self-pity, our bossy interference in other lives, our refusal to pick up after ourselves, dumping the garbage of our emotions and betrayals and cynicisms in the backyards of our neighbors. But beyond the mess we catch occasional glimpses of order and proportion, clean lines, cool clarity, and colors that invite repose and beauty. Holiness.*

*But holiness is not simply good housekeeping, an obsessive cleanliness that keeps everything in its place, bans dogs and children, and conducts all conversations in a whisper. It is not moral fussiness. It is not being nice.*

*To understand and participate in holiness, we go to the source. God is holy. Holiness therefore must refer to what is alive, whole, vibrant, personal, and relational. Maybe even a little reckless. All of which God is. And God wants us in on his holiness. Anything that suggests lifeless perfection or depersonalized abstraction, like the neatly kept parlor in which no one is free to laugh or slouch, is simply wrong. God lives, and we are most alive in God’s presence.*

*God doesn’t abandon us to our mess-making. God comes to us in Jesus and leads us into the clean, light-filled world of God’s holiness where all lines or relationship and purpose are clear; he invites us to live holy lives in his holy presence. Disgust (or despair) over our messed-up lives is replaced with deep reverence as we participate in this much larger and more bracing reality of God’s holiness.<sup>1</sup>*

Today, as Dan pointed out, is July 4<sup>th</sup>, which this year happens to fall on the Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time. July 4<sup>th</sup>, or whatever Sunday happens to be nearest July 4<sup>th</sup>, is a great day to remember that in the best of our United States tradition, we view God as some One, some presence that holds our nation to a high standard - a standard of justice and mercy and peace. You might call it a standard of holiness.

When, at the end of this service, we sing *America the Beautiful*, hear in its words a call to such holiness.

In Jesus' name.

*Amen.*

Aaron D. Fulp-Eickstaedt

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<sup>1</sup>Eugene Peterson and Anneke Kaii, *In a Word: The Image and Language of Faith* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2003).