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 Redwoods Presbyterian Church
 Larkspur, California
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Romans 8:26-28; 1 Thessalonians 5:13-18; Matthew 6:7-13
 "Sermon Meditation on the Lord's Prayer"

You have discerned by now that the theme of today's worship service is prayer. Every hymn is from the classic biblical prayer book, the Psalms. The sermon is a meditation on prayer. Strictly speaking, that's an oxymoron: One either meditates or prays. It is said: In meditation we listen to God and in prayer we speak to God. Mother Teresa complicates this when she says: "Listening is the beginning of prayer." One listens for God's will then prays: "Thy will be done." But basically, prayer is our part in a conversation with God.

Today, we meditate or prayerfully think about the prayer that Jesus taught us: The Lord's Prayer. Recently, I did a sermon meditation on the Beatitudes, a model I picked up recently at a San Francisco Theological Seminary pastor's retreat.

Texts like the Beatitudes and especially the Lord's Prayer are read or said so often that we often don't stop to think about what we are reading or saying.

Meister Eckhart calls this "mechanical praying." He writes: "One 'Hail Mary' uttered sincerely is more potent and better than a thousand uttered mechanically, for the heart is not made pure by prayer but rather prayer is made pure by the pure heart." In other words, by sincere, reflective praying.

Today, we slow down the pace in order to reflect on the meaning of the Lord's Prayer and hopefully re-enter it in a new way.

I've preached on the prayer before and today I bring new insights from Marjorie Suchocki's book *In God's Presence: Theological Reflections on Prayer*. Suchocki teaches at the School of Theology at Claremont in Southern California, my other favorite seminary.

I shall read a line or two from the Lord's Prayer, pause and repeat the reading and pause again for half a minute and then offer Suchocki's thoughts on the line, so on through the prayer.

To give justice to the prayer and since today's sermon includes a fair amount of introductory material I have divided the sermon into two weeks. I'll stop at the statement on bread, "Give us this day our daily bread," because bread will be a perfect lead into next week's Holy Communion Sunday.

Suchocki opens her chapter on the Lord's Prayer with these words: "The oldest Christian liturgical prayer is the Lord's Prayer, for it has been consistently prayed by Christians for

the two millennia of Christian history. When we today pray this prayer, in whatever language, we are praying the translated words and spirit of generations of Christians.

If God receives us into the divine self and joins us there with our relevant world, are we not then joined with those who have also prayed this prayer? Is there not a deep sense in which we are joined with them in the praise and petitions of this prayer? And since it is the prayer given to us by Jesus, we join in his spirit as we join with each other, offering to God the prayer he taught us.

Furthermore, “if we are united with those in our past, it is also the case that we ourselves become the transitional link for those who will follow us. We are the living spirituality of that prayer, and we teach it to the children of the church, raising up yet another generation who will join us in this holy prayer.”

Suchocki goes on to say: “If the prayer unites us across time, it also unites us across the geographical distances that separate us.” She speaks of worshipping in different countries, going to worship and not knowing the language and yet when the time comes in the service for the people to unite in the cadence of this particular prayer, she knows she’s at home in the Spirit of Christ. I’m sure a number of us have experienced this. I have in South Africa among African worshippers. As we softly join in the prayer with our foreigner’s tongue, we know that the language of the prayer uniting us is deeper than the differences of speech that otherwise separate us.

We shall now begin with our reflection on the prayer. I will use the biblical translation Polly read today. Let us meditate on the first line of the prayer:

Our Father in heaven (x2)

[Silence]

The great prayer begins not with the personal word “My,” but with the common word, “Our.” The God we know is mediated by our common tradition, no matter what differences of theology are embraced within it. Because we are Christians, we address God with our shared “our.” Other religions have their own sense of “our” but that’s God’s story with them, not God’s story with us... We are Christians, and our praying marks us so.

Suchocki then addresses the “Father” of the prayer. She asks: “What does maleness have to do with serving the God who is beyond gender? Jesus called God ‘Father’ in a century that was even more patriarchal than our own. But his drawing us into that naming, with ‘our Father,’ is not a vaunting of maleness – for the remarkable nature of Jesus’ ministry, and that which set him apart from all other traditions of his time, was his equal value of women and men.”

Suchocki also makes the point that linking “our” with “Father” places all children of God on an equal level irrespective of status and class. The son or daughter of a bricklayer was just as important as the son or daughter of a king which was not the case in society

at large. The “our” in the petition radically reverses the societal exclusiveness of “father.” When this reversal is recognized, a more authentic naming than “father” might be “our parent.” Our parent in heaven...

Hallowed be thy name (x2)

[Silence]

How is God’s name made holy? Suchocki writes that the next petitions provide an answer: “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

Let us meditate on these petitions in the context of “holy.”

Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. (x2)

[Silence]

God’s reign comes about as we are open to divine guidance offered us every moment. Insofar as we follow God’s guidance, we hallow God’s name. It leads to lives and acts of caring, righteousness and justice.

The reign of God is communal, even while it is personal. We understand ourselves as God’s people for the sake of a goodness that is more than our own, a richness that reaches out to enhance the well-being of the widest possible world, human and non-human.

As we open ourselves to God’s reign, living it daily, we hallow the divine name. By God’s grace, we become participants in that very hallowing for which we pray.

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven... Amen.