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First Presbyterian Church of Athens

13<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, June 26, 2016

Texts: Matthew 6:9, Ezekiel 36:22-28, I Corinthians 1:1-2

## Hallowed Be Thy Name . . . in Us

### *Introduction to Scripture*

We are examining the Lord's Prayer, line by line. We began last week with, "Our Father, who art in heaven." Today is the next part, "Hallowed be thy name." For our Old Testament reading we'll hear a passage from Ezekiel. Just before this passage we learn that the people of Israel have profaned God's name by idolatry and immoral conduct and consequently have been expelled into exile by God. Because they are known among the other nations as God's people, God has gotten a bad reputation because of them. What will the Lord do to restore his reputation? Listen for God's word: *Ezekiel 36:22-28*.

Our New Testament reading is just two verses, the opening salutation of Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth. Observe how Paul addresses the people to whom he writes as you listen again for God's word: *I Corinthians 1:1-2*.

### *Sermon*

A boy in Sunday school announced that he knew God's name. "Oh?" said his teacher. "What is it?"

"Harold," replied the boy.

"Harold? How do you know God is called 'Harold'?"

Because every Sunday we pray, "Harold be thy name."

That boy was a little confused about what the line in the Lord's Prayer, "Hallowed be thy name," really means. I must confess that I think I've been misunderstanding it all these years, too. Not until I began studying it for this sermon did I realize that "Hallowed be thy name" is a petition. It's the first of six petitions in the prayer. It's asking God for something. It's not a declaration, a declaration that means, "Your name is holy." Now, there's nothing wrong with praying, "Your name is holy," but that's not what "Hallowed be thy name" really says. It's not a declaration. It's a request. In the Greek, "hallowed" isn't an adjective. It's an imperative verb. A more accurate translation would be "Let your name be hallowed," or "May your name be made sacred," or even "Make your name holy." It's a petition, a request.

Now, I like how the early church fathers interpreted this request. The earliest Christian writers thought, "Well, God's name is already holy. It's a little silly to ask God to make his name holy. What this must really be getting at is a request that God make his name holy *in us*."<sup>1</sup> Adding those two little words, "in us," helps this petition make sense. "Hallowed be thy name in us. Hallowed be thy name in our lives."

Which is to say, we hallow God's name when we live in such a way that we bring honor to God and attract others to God. We reverence God when our words and actions reflect well on God and make others want to draw close to God.

And, of course, the opposite is equally true. We are irreverent toward God when what we say or do dishonors God and turns others away from God.

Take the case of false teaching, or bad theology, we could call it. There have been Christians who have portrayed God as harsh, cruel, and vindictive, not at all the God revealed in Jesus Christ. These people have said things like God bans from heaven unbaptized babies or sends hurricanes to punish “sinful” cities. That distorted theology does not honor God or attract people to God. Then, there are other false teachers who present God as one who rewards faith with prosperity and material blessing in a contractual, tit-for-tat way. You give to a certain televangelist and God will reward you with health and wealth. False teaching about the nature of God does not honor God and can give God a sorry reputation. Bad theology is just that--bad.

Not hallowing God’s name ties in with the third commandment, “Thou shalt not take the Lord’s name in vain.” Of course it’s commonplace to hear profanity nowadays. But cursing may not be the greatest blasphemy against God’s holy name. To invoke the name of the sovereign Creator of heaven and earth as the patron of our causes is to profane it. The German soldiers who went into battle bearing the words *Gott mit Uns* (“God with us”) on their helmets epitomize the misuse of God’s name.<sup>2</sup> Others have invoked the divine name to sanction racial prejudice. Still others have condemned--in God’s name--those who practice other religions. None of this glorifies God. On the contrary, it gives those outside Christianity ample reason to ridicule our faith and our God.

So when we pray the first petition of the Lord’s Prayer, “Hallowed be thy name (and the implied *in us*),” we are asking God’s help to live a life worthy of the name we bear. We are Christians, and we do bear Christ’s name. We are like walking billboards advertising Christ.

Do you have a First Presbyterian Church sticker on the back of your car? If so, I hope you drive kindly. I hope act compassionately toward that car trying to merge into busy traffic. And never take up two parking spaces. If not, we better add another verse to the hymn and sing, “Lord, I want to be a Christian in my car.”

Our actions either hallow God’s name or they do not. They either bring God credit or let God down. It’s not easy to lead a life that honors God, and God knows we need all the help we can get. That’s why it’s important we ask God to help us. It’s the first thing we ask for when we pray the Lord’s Prayer.

Gregory of Nyssa was one of the early church fathers who interpreted this first petition of the Lord’s prayer as a plea for help in leading a truly Christian life. In a sermon on the Lord’s Prayer he says that when praying this first petition, “Hallowed be thy name,” what he is really praying is this:

May I become through thy help blameless, just and pious. May I abstain from every evil, speak the truth, and do justice. May I walk in the straight path, shining with temperance, adorned with incorruption, beautiful through wisdom and prudence. . . . For persons can glorify God in no other way save by their virtue which bears witness that the Divine Power is the cause of their goodness.<sup>3</sup>

This is as true today as it was in the fourth century when Gregory preached it.

Two Duke professors, Willimon and Hauerwas, tell about a college student they knew.<sup>4</sup> He was the first person in his family to go to college. Someone offered the student some illegal drugs, saying, “Go ahead, try it. It’ll make you feel good.”

The student refused.

“Don’t be so uptight,” said the drug dealer. “Nobody is going to know that you tried a little dope, got a little high.”

“That’s not the point,” replied the student. “The point is that my mother cleaned houses and washed floors to send me to this college. I am here because of her. I am here for her. I wouldn’t do anything that might demean her sacrifice for me.”

That comes close to what it means to respond to God’s holiness and to want your whole life to reflect that holiness. Therefore, Christians act with integrity. We don’t cheat on our spouses or our income taxes. We are honest in business practices. We are truthful with our friends. We don’t gossip and spread rumors. We don’t bless war. We do the right thing which isn’t always the easy thing. Or, at least we endeavor to do all these things--not because we want to get on God’s good side. We don’t need to do that because in Jesus Christ we’ve already been made right with God. We strive to act with integrity because we want our lives to reflect the goodness of God. We want our lives to be permeated with God’s holiness.

This isn’t something we can achieve by ourselves. And it’s not something that happens all at once. It’s a gradual process which the Holy Spirit aids. In theological terms we call it sanctification. We are being made holy by God’s Spirit within us. As Paul said to the church in Corinth, we are being “called to be saints, sanctified in Christ Jesus.” By the way, “saint,” “sanctify,” “holy,” “hallowed”—all these English words—are translations of words found in the New Testament which stem from a single root in Greek—*haigios*.

C.S. Lewis addresses the topic of sanctification in his classic little book *Mere Christianity*. He notes that the New Testament is always talking about being born again, about putting on Christ, about Christ being formed in us, and about coming to have the mind of Christ. This is not, he says, just a fancy way of saying that Christians are to read what Christ said and try to carry it out—like you may read what Plato or Marx said and try to carry it out. Rather it is a way of saying much more. It means, Lewis writes,

that a real Person, Christ, here and now, in that very room where you are saying your prayers, is doing things to you. . . . [Christ’s] really coming and interfering with your very self; killing the old natural self in you and replacing it with the kind of Self he has. At first for only moments.

Then for longer periods. Finally, if it all goes well, turning you permanently into a different sort of thing; into a new little Christ. . . .<sup>5</sup>

By Christ’s Spirit, we are being turned into little Christs. With God’s help, our lives are becoming holy as God is holy. To use Ezekiel’s image, it’s like we are statues that are coming to life, and God is replacing our hearts of stone with hearts of flesh. God is infusing us with his life. Or to change the image, God is filling us with his light. “Let your light so shine before others,” Jesus (the Light of the World) said, “so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”<sup>6</sup> As we are sanctified, we grow in virtue, we grow in good works, and our lives emit more and more of God’s holiness. Others see this.

The famous German pagan philosopher, Frederick Nietzsche, said something that flings a challenge at every professing Christian. He said, “Show me that you are redeemed and then I will believe in your redeemer.”<sup>7</sup> So when we pray the first petition of the Lord’s Prayer, “Hallowed by thy name,” we are asking God to enable us to show that we are redeemed. We are praying that our lives bear witness to God’s goodness and beauty.

In the catechism<sup>8</sup> that he wrote, Martin Luther asks the question, “How is [God’s name] kept holy among us?” And he gives the answer: “God’s name is kept holy when the Word of

God is taught in its truth and purity, and we, as the children of God, also lead holy lives according to it.” Then he adds, “Help us to do this, dear Father in heaven!”

So as we pray, “Hallowed be thy name” what we are asking is “Hallowed be thy name in us. May our lives reflect your holiness. Help our words and actions give you a good rep. Make us into little Christs whose light brightens our world.” Amen.

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1. Cyril of Jerusalem, Cyprian, Tertullian, and Augustine all cited by William Barclay, *The Lord's Prayer*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1964), p. 47.
  2. William Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas, *Lord, Teach Us to Pray*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), p. 48.
  3. Barclay, *Op Cit.*, p. 49.
  4. Willimon and Hauerwas, *Op. Cit.*, pp 48-49.
  5. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co, 1943), p.164.
  6. Matthew 5:16.
  7. Barclay, *Op. Cit.*, p. 50.
  8. Martin Luther, *The Smaller Catechism*.