THE LIFE OF PRAYER IN A BROKEN WORLD (I)

-- a sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Santmire
Wellesley College Chapel
February 3, 1980

This is the first of two sermons on the Life of Prayer in a Broken World. I will concentrate on the Lord's Prayer, as a model for our praying.

This morning I propose to consider the inner dimension of prayer, by focusing on the beginning and the end of the Lord's prayer: "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name," and "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

Next Sunday I will try to explore the outer dimension of prayer with you, focusing on the middle petitions of the Lord's Prayer.

I.

The American Council on Education recently did a study of new students entering college in 1979, compared to those entering college ten years ago. For anyone who knows the world of higher education, I suppose,there were no surprises, particularly with regard to the responses of women.

In 1979, for example, listing goals identified as "very important or essential," 77 per cent more women cited "being well-off financially" than women ten years ago. There was more than 100 per cent increase in women citing "making a contribution to scientific theory" as one of their essential goals.

At the same time -- and this I found intriguing -- there was a marked reduction, more than a third, of those who said that "developing a philosophy of life" was one of their essential life goals.

It would seem on the surface, then, as many commentators (including this one) have concluded, that the generation of students in the 70's was careerist, not contemplative, pragmatic not pious. Perhaps.

But maybe having a philosophy of life is not all that helpful in the first place. Maybe having a lot of time to sit back, relax, and celebrate life at Woodstock was not all that cool after all. I'm haunted by the words of one of the key figures in the culture of the 1960's, John Lennon: "Don't you know it's just a fool who plays it cool, when it's getting colder?"

I have a feeling that the turn toward careerism and pragmatism that we've seen all around us in the seventies is as much a cry for help, as a search for private pleasure or security. I have a hunch that many of us live at the edge, that our holding-on-to work and security as desperately as we sometimes do is a kind of prayer, a kind of plea, a kind of petition for deliverance.

"Don't you know it's just a fool who plays it cool, when it's getting colder?" We know that, and we know it deeply. So we don't find much attractiveness in the be-ins or the love-ins or the live-ins of the Woodstock generation. We hear punk rock rather than the Yellow Submarine. We know stories of people being trampled to death at a concert, rather than folks sitting around placidly in the mud smoking dope in upstate New York.

We know that we live in a broken world. It scarcely takes the daily news to remind us of that. But then when we do return to this place with news of war all around us, with the draft breathing down people's necks once again, with the perennial but still wrenching kind of news that one of our friends has died or that one of our Trustees has suffered a destructive fall, then any suggestion that we should play it cool sounds indeed like foolishness.

This is the wrenched and torn surface of our daily lives. This is the wordless prayer of desperation that many people find surfacing in their consciousness these days, a cry for help in a broken world.

II.

The first point I want to make, then, is this. You and I stand precisely where Jesus stood, when he taught his disciples how to pray.

Most of us were probably taught the Lord's Prayer in a top-down way, beginning at the beginning, and ending at the ending, which seems natural enough. But when you're prosperous and when you're comfortable and secure, beginning at the beginning, with the "Our Father," doesn't really allow you to begin where Jesus and his disciples began.

Theirs was a world dominated by the rule of destructive principalities and powers. Theirs was a world of Roman brutality and marginal economic security. Theirs was a world of frequent illness and a short-life span. Theirs was a world in which people could become possessed, taken over, by the powers of darkness.

So when Jesus teaches his disciples to pray "Our Father," the petition at the very end of the prayer, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil," is very much implicit right at the beginning.

The Greek word which we know as "temptation" is <u>peirasmos</u>. It scarcely has any of those middle class Protestant meanings that I was taught in Sunday School: do not drink, do not smoke; beware of the lusts of the flesh, and so on. <u>Peirasmos</u> refers to eschatological woes, to the breaking up of the whole world into pieces, to the coming of the last times when all the demons would be let loose. "Evil," likewise, in this petition refers not to "bad things," blandly, as sometimes the Church has taught, but to the power of the "Evil One" in human history, the Prince of Darkness.

Hence my theme, the Life of Prayer in a Broken World. Living in a broken world is one of the assumptions of the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples. That's why, in my estimate, Jesus Christ Superstar or even Godspell never quite expressed the fullness of Christ's life and teachings given their upbeat sixties qualities. For Jesus' life came to a catastrophic end on the Cross, with Jesus crying out in desperation: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

III.

If we thus have in mind where the Lord's Prayer stands - "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil" - we can then more fruitfully, I think, begin to consider the beginning, the God to whom the prayer aspires: "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name."

To understand this petition aright, I think, we need to consider carefully the image of prayer we bring with us, whether from our religious upbringing, from religious art, or from Hollywood movies or popular television.

Some years ago I had the delightful experience of traveling in Yugoslavia and Greece. For me, one of the most memorable sights of those several weeks came in Northern Greece, in the mountains, in a region called Meteora. There you can see scores of pinnacled rocks, thin mountain-like columns that rise abruptly from the valleys into the heavens above. Some of them are perhaps ten times as tall as this Chapel, but often not very much larger horizontally than the space we occupy right now.

Built on the tops of many of these spires are ancient Christian monasteries, which monks built with painstaking efforts, carrying up all their stones and tools in baskets with long ropes, in order to find a place of repose in a war-torn world.

That's the image of God that has often been suggested to us by theologians and by the artists of the Church. God is the one who is high and lifted up. God is the one who dwells in heaven, as the Lord's Prayer suggests, in the glorious Beyond of eternity. God is the one whose name is to be hallowed, precisely because God is omni: omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, dwelling in transcendent glory in heaven.

A turn-of-the century American poet, Mary Sinton Leitch, whose name is probably justifiably not prominent in your American Literature courses, once wrote a poem entitled, "The Summit, Mt. Everest." In it, she envisions herself ascending to the peak of that famous mountain, the highest place, presumably, in the world. So she concludes,

> While far below men crawl in clay and clod,
> Sublimely, I shall stand alone with God.

These may well be important religious insights; and I suppose they are, not to be forgotten, lest we end up domesticating God, like some pet dog who is supposed to come and go whenever we whistle. We surely need to keep the sublimity of God, the exaltedness of God, the holiness of God, the otherness and glorious mystery of God in mind whenever we pray.

But as many of you know, the radicalness of the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples is something else. Many religions can helpfully tell us about the exalted mystery and the otherness of God, including Christianity. But Jesus's accent is precisely the opposite.

When Jesus prays "Our Father," or pater humon in the Greek, or, in his own tongue, Abba, he is addressing a God who is intimately near. Abba is the word a child would use of his or her parent, with many of the resonances of our words "daddy" or "mommy."

"While below men crawl in clay and clod," Mary Sinton Leitch says, "Sublimely, I shall stand alone with God." In contrast, for Jesus, God is known precisely where people crawl in clay and clod, not in the exalted heavens as such, but first and foremost on this mundane earth.

In this connection, I imagine -- if you will permit this very private observation -- I imagine that Joseph - from whom Jesus presumably learned something about what it means to be a father - was no Calvinistic or Freudian patriarch; but what the Jews call a Mensch, a human being, one who nurtured Jesus with sensitivity and tender-loving care in his carpenter shop, as the boy was growing up, one who could cry when he faced a severe loss, one who could depend on his son and his wife and others in times of need.

Likewise, I imagine Mary - from whom Jesus also learned some things about parental figures - I imagine Mary not as she appears in some popular Church art, as the submissive female, with no mind of her own, but as the Mary we hear in the Magnificat, who dreams dreams and sees visions of the Kingdom of God on this earth, and who later, as good Church art has always shown, strongly suffers with, bears with, her son, through his woes on the cross.

In any case, the God to whom Jesus prays in this prayer - Abba - is not the exalted Other, who dwells mysteriously in some heavenly beyond, not some celestial patriarch, but a God who is immediately near to us powerfully caring for us, indeed, suffering with us in our anguish, as we also seek the coming of the Kingdom of God.

So Augustine says at one point in his Confessions that God is nearer to us than we are to ourselves. Or Pascal, picking up a saying from the tradition of Christian mysticism, says figuratively, but powerfully: "God is the circle whose center is everywhere, but whose circumference is nowhere."

We should therefore perhaps bracket our images of God as the one who dwells above, whether at Meteora or Mt. Everest, and think first of that image that has always been far more at the center of Christian piety, the Cross. Our God, as theologian Juergen Moltmann so vividly expresses it, is the Crucified God. Our God, the One to whom we pray as Jesus taught us to pray, is the one who is immediately near to us, in the clay and the clod of our experience, caring for us, suffering for us, suffering with us, suffering within us, as we suffer, as we struggle, as we rejoice in all God's blessings.

V.

I want to conclude now with the practical suggestions about praying the Lord's prayer, or any prayer for that matter.

I would like to think of prayer now as the art of finding the inward connection between the broken world of our daily experience and the God who is with us, whom Jesus has taught us to address.

First: it is not necessary, and perhaps not even helpful, for any of us to go chasing off to some Meteora or some Mt. Everest in order to search for the presence of God. Prayer, as Jesus teaches us, is not a matter of making a connection between the Here and the Beyond, but rather the art of finding a connection, or acknowledging a connection, that is already established, between the Here and the Here, between our inner selves and the One who is closer to us than we are to ourselves.

T.S. Eliot describes the kind of pilgrimage that many of the faithful have experienced throughout the ages, questing for God, searching for God, in some far exalted place, but then finding God gloriously in the stuff of their daily experience:

> We shall not cease from exploration
> And the end of all our exploring
> Will be to arrive where we started
> And know the place for the first time.

Prayer, in a word, is not the process of seeking for something far away which you don't have, but the art of attending here and now to a reality that's immediately given to you, where you live. That's my first practical suggestion for praying the Lord's prayer, or any prayer: Attend to what is given you in your experience, where you are; don't feel that you have to go off and climb Mt. Everest to find God.

My second practical suggestion does not sound very biblical, I know, but I think it is, if you will hear me through. If you want to pray, if you want to explore the art of finding the connection between the Here and the Here, between this broken world and the God who is with us, then you'll probably have to do something odd.

Do something odd. Kneeling is odd. Going to Church on a cold morning, when everyone else in their right mind would rather stay under the warm covers, is odd. Speaking strange words like "hallowed be thy name" or "lead us not into temptation" is odd. Reading a psalm every night before you go to bed, even though you can hardly keep your eyes open, even though you may be profoundly preoccupied with your own personal needs and not with God -- that's odd, too.

A friend of mine, Prof. Richard Baer, of Cornell University, has written an article on prayer, in which he compares Quaker Silence, high Anglican liturgy, and the phenomenon of speaking in tongues. He argues, and I believe he's right, that most of us, especially academic people, are imprisoned by what he calls "the tyranny of the cognitive mind."

That is to say, we use our minds in such a way as to control everything we perceive. so that we can be in charge of our experience, so that nothing can enter into our experience that threatens us or that otherwise suggests that we are not in control of everything we do.

Richard Baer then suggests that Quaker silence, high Anglican liturgy, and speaking in tongues are all the same, essentially; they all help us to break with the tyranny of the cognitive mind, with the mind-set that gives us the security of thinking that we're in control of our experience.

Just think about it, on the face of it. How odd it is for a group of people, such as the Friends, to sit around in a room for an hour or more with no agenda, with no one in charge, with no one having made plans to say anything.

Likewise, high Anglican liturgy or Catholic liturgy: how odd it is to wave incense in front of the person who reads the Gospel lesson for the day. How odd it is to stand and kneel and genuflect and make the sign of the cross and chant tunes from the Middle Ages.

Or the ecstatic phenomenon of speaking in tongues: Not too long ago Mary Lee Daugherty spoke here from this podium. She is a candidate for ministry in the Presbyterian Church; her background, however, is the ecstatic worship of the churches in Appalachia, where people regularly speak in tongues.

The other day I had to try to explain to a ten year old I know, who was doing a report on the Shakers, why the Shakers shook. I should have told her, now that I think of it, that the art of prayer, the art of finding the connection between the brokenness of our experience and the God who is with us often requires us to do something odd.

I take it that this is what was involved when Jesus took his disciples apart, and when he went apart as he often did, to pray. He broke with the tyranny of the everyday mind-set. He acted in such a way that it was clear that neither he nor any other mortal was in control of the ebb and flow of daily experience.

These are my two suggestions, then to anyone who wants to begin practicing or to deepen the practice of the art of prayer. Try looking at, try attending to, the clay and the clod, the everyday-ness of your ordinary experience, since prayer is the art of finding the connection between the Here and the Here. And as you do that, try doing something odd, try out some discontinuous discipline, whether it be posture or words or sounds or place, whether it be silence or liturgy or speaking in tongues.

This, I believe, is a way that the Lord's Prayer can hold our lives together, that we can say, with a fresh sense of excitement, everyday: "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name," and "lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." Amen.