

“Chicken Culture: The Lord’s Prayer, part 1”

By Scott Runyon

January 7, 2018

FBCB

Matthew 6:5-13

INTRO

We just celebrated the birth of Jesus, God in human flesh, in the person of Jesus. We celebrate that God came to live with us as one of us. The point wasn’t simply that God is here with us, although that is in itself a powerful part of the story. No, God, through Jesus, brought to us an example and some amazing teachings about the way that God designed human beings, and what is important in life. The core of these teachings are found in the Lord’s Prayer.

One version or another of the Lord’s Prayer is familiar to nearly everyone in the Christian Church. Together, many pray this prayer each Sunday morning. However, there is much more to it than we realize.

We will be exploring this central prayer of Jesus for the next six weeks beginning today with a bit of an overview.

SERMON

READ MATTHEW 6:5-13

Each word of the Lord’s Prayer was chosen deliberately and is loaded with meaning. To help us better understand this prayer of course we need to begin with chickens.

How many of you have spent much time around chickens? I grew up with chickens back in the 1980s, feeding and watering them, collecting and selling eggs to my teachers and neighbors.

A handful of years ago, my dad bought some chickens for the first time in many years. I hadn’t been around chickens for about 20 years or so so I was able to watch them with new eyes.

One year, as the weather got colder in November, my dad closed up the chickens in the barn to keep them warm for the winter. I was with him there a couple of months later during a warm and sunny January day, like we all would love to have right now. It was so warm that he decided the chickens might enjoy roaming around outside after being cooped up for several months. So, he pulled open the hatch to let them outside into the chicken run.

Now chickens are creatures of habit and they had become accustomed to that hatch being closed for some time. They let us know right away they didn't like it open.

I could tell because of two things. First, they all avoided the hatch. Second, they started squawking — a very distinctive squawk. If you've spent much time around chickens when a predatory animal is near or you do something out of the ordinary, you know what I am talking about.

Then, a rooster jumped up to the ledge at the hatch and looked outside.

Now, to understand what happened next you have to know a few things about chicken culture.

In chicken culture, the roosters look out for the hens and the hens follow the lead of the roosters. Roosters will keep an eye out for danger, patrolling the perimeter of an area while the hens eat. Even when the yummiest food is dropped in front of them they are not interested. Their primary job is to protect the hens.

So, when the rooster jumped up on the ledge to look outside, the whole

flock got instantly and completely silent as they watched and waited for the rooster to let them know what to do next. You could hear a pin drop in the barn.

This is chicken culture and speaks to the relationship between roosters and hens. It tells you how and why they do the things they do.

In the same way, it is helpful to understand a bit of rabbi culture — the relationship between a rabbi and their disciples — in order to understand the Lord's Prayer.

Sometimes we forget that Jesus was a Jewish rabbi and they had a very unique culture especially when they took on disciples.

If you were a Jewish child in Jesus' day, you would grow up being taught to love the scriptures. After diligent study, you would ask to study under a rabbi and the rabbi would either say "Yes" or "No."

The rabbi would only say "Yes" if he considered you a worthy student and able to follow him and be like him. It was a great honor to be chosen to follow a rabbi.

If you were chosen, it meant that you would leave everything behind: your parents, home, and career.

You would then dedicate your whole life with singular focus to learn from your rabbi. It would be your only job to become a mirror image of your rabbi.

You would have to watch your rabbi closely for their every little idiosyncrasy, every nuance in their personality and way of life, including how they walk, how they talk, how they serve, how they think, how they feel, how they understand God, how they interact with others — everything!

Essentially, everything you thought you knew before you began following him would have to be unlearned, and your life re-patterned after your rabbi.

That is what it meant to carry your rabbi's yoke. Most rabbis would have many rules and difficult requirements for their disciples and following a rabbi was considered by everyone a difficult yoke to bear.

A few minutes ago, I read the Lord's Prayer from Matthew's gospel. Luke also included this prayer. In Luke's story, it was Jesus' disciples who came to him asking how they were to pray.

They didn't do this because they had a tough time saying their

bedtime prayers, or needed help praying in community worship. It was much more involved than that.

In Jesus' day, and even to this day, each rabbi has their own unique prayer. Jesus' disciples went to him asking to learn his prayer because this was expected of them on their quest to be like him.

Jesus' disciples knew that rabbis had long and involved rhetorical masterpieces for their prayers. These prayers were always spoken in the ancient Hebrew language of their holy scriptures, which they knew as God's language!

A rabbi's prayer will teach their disciples about all things that are central to being human: how to understand God and God's relationship with people. It encapsulates the core and essence of their teaching, the foundation of their theology, and their philosophy of life.

It is a disciple's job to learn their rabbi's prayer, but not just to memorize the words. They learn the proper emphasis and all of its inflections and underlying meanings. They will then work diligently to pattern their life after what that prayer has taught them.

It was a tremendous burden to take on the yoke of a rabbi because it effected every area of life. But this was what it means to follow faithfully. It was the most important task of a disciple.

It was no wonder that Jesus' disciples asked to learn his prayer.

I can picture them hanging on their edge of their seats, poised and ready with steno goatskin notebooks and quills in hand to take meticulous notes.

However, the prayer that Jesus gave them was anything but typical. It probably blew them away.

First of all, it was so brief. It was only a few lines long — not long enough to even cover one steno goatskin page.

Another startling thing about Jesus' prayer is completely missed in our English translations. Jesus gave them his prayer in the Aramaic language. This was startling because Aramaic was the common language of the people, not the sacred Hebrew language of God.

Jesus was teaching them that God was accessible not only to the inner circle of Jews who had knowledge of the classical sacred Hebrew

language. He taught them the radical idea that everyday common folk like you and me have the same access to God. We can simply speak to God in our everyday language.

How freeing is that for you and me?

This was the way of Jesus.

Let's pause for a moment here and consider how we might have created a nice little white picket fence around our God to keep out those who don't seem to have the right kind of language, background, skin color, lifestyle, or speak as well as we might like. How open are we to welcome and include those who Jesus taught were to be included?

The language Jesus chose for his prayer reinforced this idea of inclusion.

Jesus' prayer does not include any reference to "I" "Me" or "Mine." Jesus instead instructed his disciples (this includes us) to pray "OUR" Father, as an inclusive unifying way to think. Later in the prayer he instructed them to pray "Give US today OUR daily bread."

It begs the question, who is included in "OUR and US?" This

might seem trivial, but is in fact central!

In Matthew 6, Jesus' audience was clear. He was on the Mount of Olives speaking to a group of his disciples. This was a training session for them to become leaders of the Church after he was gone. He needed them to learn how to live as a faithful people.

Jesus seemed to be including more than just his small group of disciples. He was casting the net broadly enough to include even those who didn't recognize Jesus as their rabbi. He was teaching his disciples to include and stand with all of humanity!

His use of OUR has a way of turning us away from a self-centered faith in order to include others. This prayer takes the most intimate bedtime prayer and makes it vastly public and broad.

This prayer of Jesus has the power to FORM a community — a diverse and inclusive community who can together pray "OUR Father."

If we follow Jesus' example as a good disciple, we will specifically include those most in need anywhere we find them outside our white picket fence — just like Jesus

did when he welcomed the Samaritan woman at the well, the beggars, lepers, tax collectors, sinners, even the Roman centurion guard, and many others.

It is much like what Mother Teresa, now Saint Teresa of Calcutta, wrote in her book "The Joy of Living." Teresa was the humble Roman Catholic nun who dedicated her life to be sure that the poor, sick, orphaned and dying received unconditional love and dignity. She wrote these words,

"I will never forget the night an old gentleman came to our house and said that there was a family with eight children and they had not eaten, and could we do something for them. So, I took some rice and went there. The mother took the rice from my hands, then she divided it into two and went out. I could see the faces of the children shining with hunger. When she came back I asked her where she had gone. She gave me a very simple answer 'They are hungry also.' And 'they' were the family next door and she knew that they were hungry. I was not surprised that she gave, but I was surprised that she knew...I had not the courage to ask her how long her family hadn't eaten, but I am sure it must have been a long time, and

yet she knew — in her suffering ... in her terrible bodily suffering she knew that next door they were hungry also.”

The mother recognized that the rice was not hers alone. She knew it as OUR rice just as in Jesus’ prayer it is OUR Father and OUR Bread.

This understanding of the broader US required her to be selfless and take on responsibility to include whoever she found in need.

This resonated for Jesus’ disciples who were good students of history. They would have recalled Abraham, who was widely known as an example in the way he welcomed strangers from outside of the faith and offered them food and hospitality.

They would have remembered the example of Jesus’ actions to care for people like the untouchable half-breed Samaritans from outside the Jewish faith, for refugees, and foreigners. He spoke about how he came to preach good news not to the wealthy, but to the poor, and advocate freedom for those imprisoned, and bring recovery of sight for the blind.

Could it be that Jesus was implying in his prayer that OUR and US

includes people outside of our faith group, beyond the white picket fences that we have installed to maintain control and remain exclusive, keeping us “safe” from those out there?

Throughout his ministry, Jesus continually identified himself with people outside the Jewish community, to the point that religious leaders were out to kill him.

Was it not these whom Jesus came to serve and these for whom he came to die?

If we are to take Jesus seriously, then, like his disciples, we will take his prayer seriously and find ways to follow Jesus as our rabbi. This will call us to be responsible for a bigger community, to all of OUR neighbors.

If we include as “US” only those who have proclaimed faith in Jesus from inside our white picket fence — those who look, think, and act like us — perhaps we are excluding those who Jesus had given his life to include.