

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Praying Like Jesus: Holy Be Your Name”
Rev. Dr. John Judson
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Exodus 20:7

Matthew 6:9-13

Her name was Margaret. I first met her when I was five years old and she, her husband and her son were already members of the church that my family joined. Her son, Brice became my best friend at church and eventually when we moved into their neighborhood became my best friend for life. Margaret taught me in Sunday school and even became my 8th grade English teacher, a task from which I am not sure she ever recovered. But the thing about Margaret, was that she was never Margaret to me, she was always Mrs. Wilborn. In fact, I did not know that her name was Margaret until I was in my twenties, when she began to insist that I call her by her first name. However, I was never able to do that. She would always be Mrs. Wilborn. I suppose in some ways it was out of habit. I had grown up being taught that you never called adults by their first names because it was not respectful. She had been my teacher, both of faith and of grammar and so she deserved to be called by her family name. She had earned a continuing respect, and that was how I offered it. Any of you have someone like that in your life? If so, then you have a sense of what Jesus is talking about when he says to God, “Hallowed be They Name.”

What I mean by this is that to say Hallowed be Thy Name, or holy be your name in prayer, means we are intent on showing God the respect that God is due. Let me say that again. To say Hallowed be Thy Name is a reminder to us that we are intent on showing God the respect that God is due. Let me explain. First, this idea is inherent in the phrase itself. To hallow something, or to see it as being holy, is to see it as being different or out of the ordinary in such a way that it is to be given respect and reverence. It means to approach it in a manner different from the way we would approach normal things in the world. Jews would have said the Temple was holy because it was not an ordinary building, but one in which one encountered the living God. So, one was to respect or revere it. They would have said the Torah, or Law of Moses, was holy because it was not an ordinary book. It was the Book given by God, and in it one could find God’s words and God’s commands. So one was to respect or revere it. The second half of the phrase, name, as in hallowed be They Name, simply refers to God. Name here is not a name like John, Bob, Sue or Helen. Name is a code word for the very essence of an individual. So, you put these together and you get that this phrase means to show God the respect that God is due.

This leaves us with two issues though. First, why does God deserve this respect and second, what does giving God respect look like? I suppose that many of us might say God deserves this respect because, well God is God, the Big “G”, the Man upstairs. And because God is God, God deserves our respect. What is interesting about the scriptures is that this is never the reason God is supposed to have our respect or reverence. Instead, God is to have our respect because God is Father. For those of you who were here last week, we discussed what Jesus meant by Father; that it meant we were to see God as the one who liberates and leads us in life. We see God acting as Father in the opening words of the Ten

Commandments where God makes it clear that people ought to obey the commandments because it was God who brought the people out of Egypt and led them to life in the wilderness and beyond. Thus, God is to be shown reverence and respect, because God was the one who acted as Father. And this concept, that God deserves respect and reverence because of what God did continues. God is the one who keeps God's covenant promises, who shows mercy and compassion to the poor, the widow, the orphan and the alien. God is the one who brings justice. God is the one whose steadfast love endures forever. The respect that God is due then is not because of God's title on the door of heaven. It is because God has earned it by showing the love, faithfulness and compassion of the Father.

The second, and still critical piece then, is what does it mean to show respect? The answer, simply put, is that we are to listen to, learn from and follow the ways of God. Again, this returns us to Jesus' words about God as Father. As the Torah makes clear, children were to honor their mothers and fathers. This meant they were to listen to them, learn from them and follow them...usually into their occupations and practices. We are to do the same. We are to listen to God and live in God's ways of love, compassion, respect, justice and mercy. If we want to see what this looks like we need look no further than Jesus. Granted, if anyone were born into this world with the playbook of following God, it should have been Jesus. Jesus ought not to have had to look to the sidelines and ask, "Hey Dad, what play should I run?" Yet, Jesus did just that. Jesus spent hours and hours in prayer. He was constantly turning to God, seeking God's guidance. In so doing Jesus was demonstrating what it meant to show God the respect that God was due. Jesus was listening to, learning from and striving to always follow the ways of God, even when it meant his death.

When you and I pray then, "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name," we are making a commitment to listen to, learn from and follow God, out of the respect that God is due. My challenge to you then is this, to ask yourself, as you come forward for communion, "How am I giving God the respect that God is due, for all that God has done for me?"