THE LORD'S PRAYER—An Almost-Easter Reflection

The Reverend Karen Lewis Foley March 9, 2008
Unitarian Universalist Church of Ellsworth, Maine

Readings:

1. "A Prayer for the World," by Rabbi Harold S. Kushner:

Let the rain come and wash away the ancient grudges,
the bitter hatreds held and nurtured over generations.
Let the rain wash away the memory of the hurt, the neglect.
Then let the sun come out and fill the sky with rainbows.
Let the warmth of the sun heal us wherever we are broken.
Let it burn away the fog so that we can see each other clearly.
So that we can see beyond labels, beyond accents, gender or skin color.
Let the warmth and brightness of the sun melt our selfishness.
So that we can share the joys and feel the sorrows of our neighbors.
And let the light of the sun be so strong that we will see all people as our neighbors.
Let the earth, nourished by rain, bring forth flowers to surround us with beauty.
And let the mountains teach our hearts to reach upward to heaven. Amen.

2. Matthew 6: 5-13 (Don't be like the hypocrites who pray in public in the synagogues; don't be like the gentiles who pile up empty phrases; pray in private, and pray like this. The traditional "Lord's Prayer" follows.)

Words of the pastoral prayer are a version of the Lord's Prayer by Jim Cotter from the New Zealand Book of Common Prayer:

Eternal Spirit,
Life-Giver, Pain-Bearer, Love Maker,
Source of all that is and that shall be,
Father and Mother of us all,
Loving God, in whom is heaven:

The Hallowing of your Name echo through the universe!
The Way of your Justice be followed by the people of the world!
Your Heavenly Will be done by all created beings!
Your Commonwealth of Peace and Freedom sustain our hope and come on earth!

With the bread we need for today, feed us.
In the hurts we absorb from one another, forgive us.
In times of temptation and test, strengthen us.
From trials too great to endure, spare us.
From the grip of all that is evil, free us.

For your reign is the glory of the power that is love, now and forever. Amen.

Sermon:

A couple of years ago I gathered with a small and varied group from an array of faith traditions—Unitarian Universalist, Roman Catholic, and United Church of Christ—to lead them in a retreat called "How Shall I Pray?" I expected their differences in language and concepts of prayer to create barriers and block mutual understanding. One Unitarian was unsure whether there was a God to pray to, the Roman Catholic ordained deacon had liturgical prayer printed on his soul, and the stories of the other five filled the gamut between.

But surprise! They were open, respectful of each other, honest about their own experience, and above all, full of yearning for a deeper experience and connection with something larger than themselves. These people wanted to find ways to pray that could make sense of and give voice to their hopes, their joys, their fears, their failures, their deepest needs and grief. Isn't this what brings anyone to prayer who goes there? It what brought me there and still does.

Someone has said that every good prayer needs four things: gratitude, yearning, forgiveness, and hope. We need to express thanks for the things that bless us, name what we desire, acknowledge the ways we fall short and cause harm, forgive those who fall short of our expectations or harm us, and voice our deepest hopes. I often keep that foursome in mind when I write prayers for worship, though I admit I don't when I pray every morning—I just say what's on my heart.

So this morning, just a week before Palm Sunday, when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey to be hailed as messiah and executed as a criminal, I think about him, one of the greatest pray-ers of all time. He taught people a new way of experiencing their relationship with the sacred, in prayer and in their living. It seems like a good Sunday to re-consider that famous prayer he taught his friends, a prayer that has rung down the centuries, assuring and comforting many, alienating others as it came to seem rote and lost its meaning. Maybe you're one of those who take refuge in its ritual pattern; maybe you're among the alienated; maybe it's just not part of your background and experience.

Divinity school taught me a process called "exegesis"—examining and taking apart a text to understand it better. Now both my undergraduate and graduate degrees were in English literature. I'd learned a lot about studying texts in this way and I took to exegesis like a duck to water! So that's how I approach this well-known prayer. I hope you'll either enjoy, or be challenged, or have your interest piqued by it.

There are two versions of the Lord's Prayer: Matthew's is familiar and Luke's is briefer. First, a quick bit of Biblical history. Of the four gospels, Mark is the earliest; Matthew and Luke used Mark as a basis and then, added other stuff. These three are called the synoptic gospels because they give fairly parallel synopses of Jesus' life and teaching. John's gospel, the latest, is a highly literary, even poetic piece of—dare I say it?—propaganda. I love it for its symbolic and metaphoric language, but like others, I'm troubled by its layers of anti-Semitism.

These four books tell us that Jesus prayed throughout his ministry—frequently alone, especially after a busy day of healing and teaching. The last time we see Jesus praying is just before he's arrested. He's alone, as alone as a person can possibly be, because he knows what's coming next: arrest and execution. This is one of the few times we actually hear his words: please, if it is possible, let me not die; but I will follow your will, not mine.

The Lord's Prayer comes earlier, when, according to Luke, his friends ask him, *teach us how to pray*. He begins by telling them, look, don't be like those hypocritical Jews who make a public show of their prayer; prayer is a private conversation between you and God (as we see he lived it himself). But he doesn't tell them to stop being Jews. Don't be like the Gentiles, either (or in other translations, "pagans" or "heathens"), with their "empty words." You don't need to be fancy or clever with words; God already knows what you need and want. This is a God who is close to us as our own breath.

In Mark and Matthew he says if we have faith we'll receive what we pray for. This isn't easy for many of us—especially if we've ever prayed for something and not gotten it. And prayer can't be simply a "tool" to get our way. But I don't think that's what Jesus had in mind. Here he says if you pray sincerely, you will *receive your reward*—he doesn't say how. There is a saying that our prayers are always answered, and sometimes the answer is "No." Perhaps Jesus is speaking not about our particular desire of the moment but the deeper reality of our souls. For when he prayed at his life's end, what he wanted *and asked for* was not to die; but what he more deeply desired was: *thy will, not mine, be done.*

And now what of those words that have become so familiar that most of us can say them by heart?

Our Father, who art in heaven: God-as-father has come to seem old-fashioned, patriarchal in the worst sense, and many have rejected it. But we have to remember that when Jesus said it, it was new and must have startled people. The gods were powerful, punishing, sometimes capricious; mighty in battle, in control of nature. But here is Jesus repeatedly calling God a new name: "Abba," which means, not the more formal "father," but something like "Papa" or "Daddy." This is a deeply intimate image, although I realize that for those with deeply troubled relationships with that parent, it may not be a reassuring image. It's meant, though, to suggest God as loving parent, wanting the best for us, listening to us, showering affection and meeting our truest needs. If we can't see God in a personified way, maybe we can experience that parental quality in the love of family and friends, or the dependable rhythms of nature. Or even just the way Life keeps on keeping on and somehow we are able to, too, when things seem most hopeless.

Hallowed be thy name: There's a story. A father overhears his little son praying, "Dear Harold, bless Mommy and Daddy, my sister," and so on. He asks, "Why are you praying to someone named Harold?" The boy replies, "It says right in that prayer, Harold be thy name." Which goes to show the power of words that we don't even understand. In Jewish practice, the real name of God is too sacred to even pronounce. "Jahweh" or "Jehovah" is a version of the letters JHW—orV—H which stand for God's answer to Moses when Moses asked God who God was: "I am that I am." I am Being Itself. I am the holiness of existence. The Hindu greeting "Namaste" means simply, "The sacred in me greets the sacred in you." We are all part of each other and of Being itself. The last congregation I served spoke their benediction together at the end of every service. The final words were "Honor all beings." One could as well say "Honor being wherever it is."

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven: Jesus was always talking about the kingdom of God. To understand this line we need to remember that at the time, the most accessible image of power was a ruler—a king. So when Jesus talked about the kingdom of God he evoked the dependency of all humanity on the holiness at the heart of life. But he made it clear

that we are intimately involved in and *responsible for* this kingdom. "The kingdom of God is *among you*," he told people. The kingdom of God on earth is sacred power entrusted to, and acting in, us. It might be as demanding and public as walking in a civil rights march or as simple and homely as taking a casserole to a family when someone has died. This is no passive Hey God, make everything OK. This is, may your spirit be in *us* as *we* try to make things better. I've always been grateful to the wise person who said, "Prayer doesn't change things; prayer changes people, and people change things."

Give us this day our daily bread: That's Matthew's version. Luke says, "Give us *each* day our daily bread." I've always thought that "this day" asks us to let go of anxiety about getting what we need today, as in "give us what we need today; tomorrow we'll pray for tomorrow." But it turns out the word Jesus used for "daily bread" means "bread for the morrow." So it seems Jesus expresses his deep trust that our lives will be sustained on a daily basis—for all our days. We are like the Israelites wandering in the wilderness, when manna turned up every morning and dissolved by evening, but kept turning up faithfully, every morning.

And forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors: Luke's version is: *forgive us our sins, for we forgive everyone who is indebted to us.* Clearly we're not dealing here with material debts but with those ubiquitous missings-of-the-mark, little me-firsts, fulfillments we think will serve us but wind up separating us from each other. *Trespasses*, as many Protestants say, suggest how sins great and small violate our relationships. It's popular these days to say that sin doesn't really exist; we're all essentially good and it's just lack of goodness that creates problems. But I do think we understand sin best when we experience a violation of our connection with each other and with Life.

Jesus was bigger on forgiveness than almost anything else. As soon as he finishes the prayer he says, "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." *That* is his only summary of this prayer! It all hinges on forgiveness. The prayer, until now calling upon God to act in our lives, suddenly recalls us, the pray-ers, to our own involvement: *we* need to take action in reciprocity with God.

And lead us not into temptation: This is where Luke ends the prayer. But Matthew continues, *but deliver us from evil.* There's been a lot of commentary on these lines. Some recall Jesus' temptations during his forty days in the wilderness. But would Jesus suggest we shouldn't have to face temptations? I'm not so sure; facing them prepared him for his ministry. Some think this is a request—God please don't "test" us. But I don't recall any place in the gospels where Jesus suggests that God tests people. I wonder if Jesus, who knew his Scripture well, is recalling the 23rd Psalm, where God leads us by still waters and in the paths of righteousness. These lines suggest that we know our own fallibility and attraction to evil all too well. I read them like this: be with us in times of temptation, don't let us fall into evil.

That little word "and" intrigues me. Jesus keeps linking things together: *Give us our bread…AND forgive us our debts…AND lead us not*…. That little word links together *receiving* daily sustenance with *forgiving and being forgiven* and with *being kept safe from temptation and evil*. Jesus wasn't an English major but am I going too far in noticing how closely he links these three things? Three requests, with forgiveness at the center. It seems that our daily sustenance is more

than physical (Jesus did say that people don't live only on food) and that spiritual wellbeing hinges on our ability to forgive and be forgiven.

And then the Protestant ending—now often used by Catholics—got tacked on at some point: *For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever*. I've even seen it in some contemporary Bible versions. Two versions of this tag-on existed long before the Protestant Reformation. One source says they appeared in several versions of gospels in the 4th through 9th centuries. But it seems that some early Christians decided we need to be reminded of who is fully in charge—and it isn't us!

Since Jesus recommends praying alone, and did it so often himself, isn't it curious that he prays this prayer in the first person *plural*? *Our* father, *our* debts, forgive *us*, deliver *us*. It's possible that the gospel authors meant to offer a corporate prayer for the newly emerging Christian community. After all, the gospels are not just literature or biography. They were written to teach and spread the news and to draw early Christians together in community. But suppose these are the historically accurate words of the historical Jesus?

Jesus did talk about the individual's relationship with God, but he also insisted repeatedly that the individual is responsible to others and to the community. *Whoever does this to the least of these does it to me; feed the hungry, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless. Love your neighbor as yourself.* The first person plural—we, us—brings us back to the beginning of the prayer: the kingdom of God is ours to create, and inextricably woven with human community. This can't be done by one person alone. He doesn't say the kingdom of God is *in* you, the individual. He says the kingdom of God is *among* you, the people. On another level, "we" and "us" remind us that spiritually, we are really all the same, all children of God.

All four of those elements someone has said should be in every good prayer—Jesus had them all. Gratitude for the presence of the sacred in our life. Yearning for our daily bread, and for the strength to withstand temptation and evil. Forgiveness: the lynchpin—being forgiven and forgiving. And hope: that in community we might make real the sacred among us.

For those of us who don't find meaning in praying to a personal God, we might hear echoes of Jesus' prayer in the "Prayer for the World" by Rabbi Harold Kushner. Kushner just says, let us be healed, let us be able to see clearly, let us feel each others' joys and sorrows, let us live in earth's beauty, "let the mountains teach our hearts/ to reach upward to heaven." It is not very different from what another Jew, 2000 years earlier, was praying.