Earlier this week I was talking with a friend of mine who is one of the paid singers at St. John’s Roman Catholic cathedral here in Cleveland. She is there for her signing ability, but isn’t actually Christian herself. I think she is best described as a religious seeker, who is interested in God and in religion, but she has no definitive affiliation with any particular tradition. Nevertheless, due to her work she is in attendance regularly for Mass. While we were talking she said, “I really just don’t get all the prayers and rituals and all of that. The whole thing just seems like a lot of saying things over and over again, and it doesn’t have anything to do being a good person. Why can’t Christians just get together and talk about how to be good people?”

My friend, an outsider to Christian religious practices, did not see that there was any relationship between our communal prayer on Sunday mornings, and how we are to actually live in the world as Christians! And I cannot blame her for this, for I know that I can be guilty of rattling off our prayers without always appreciating the depth, beauty, and power of our prayers. This mornings’ Gospel text is the one in which Jesus teaches us the Lord’s Prayer. This prayer forms the basis for all Christian prayer! Today I want to take some time to look more closely at this familiar prayer, to help close the gap that exists for people like my friend, who do not see the connection between how we pray, and how we live as Christians. Oh, and for this exploration today I will be thinking of the contemporary version of the
Lord’s prayer that is used in worship, which combines elements from Matthew’s version and Luke’s version of the Lord’s Prayer.

The prayer begins by addressing God as “Our Father.” This first word, “Our,” is important as it straightaway sets the tone of the prayer as a communal one. To be Christian is to be in community, for none of us, completely independently of all others, decided for ourselves to be Christian. That God is addressed as “Father,” is primarily about gender, but rather the relationship between the persons of the Holy Trinity. “Father” is a metaphor that points to mutual love between the persons of the Godhead, as well as God’s love for creation. Other metaphors for God may be explored, such as “Parent,” or “creator.” However, for Christians, there is a reason why “Father” is the primary metaphor above all others. It is not because Christians looked out at the world, at the beauty of the stars or of the mountains and simply thought that there must be something “More,” and that the best metaphor for this “more” is “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” No, our Christian language of prayer regarding God comes not from ourselves, not from our own experience, but from Jesus! We know God as Father because Jesus, the Son of God, has made the Father known!

The prayer continues, “in haven, hallowed be your name.” So far the prayer is all about the holiness of God, and not yet about how we are to live, just a couple brief notes here. First, by recognizing God as, “in heaven,” Christians are acknowledging God’s vantage point, that God’s ways are higher than our ways. God sees beyond the limited scope of our human seeing and knowing. As for “hallowed be your name,” this is Christian adoration of God. When we adore God in worship,
and love what is holy, we ourselves are made holy. This aspect of our Christian prayer is not immediately observable by the outside visitor, like my friend in the choir. Loving God is an end in itself, and not a means to something else. And yet, it is through loving God together in the community that is the Church, that we bring about our own sanctification!

Ok, now only after God has been addressed and properly honored and adored does the prayer have more direct implications for how we are to live in the world. The next line, “Your Kingdom Come.” Christians pray that God’s Kingdom will come on earth! There is a dualism here between the Kingdom of God, and the world! With the logic of the world, it is money, power, force, fame, etc that really matter. These are thing things that powerful people cared about most in Jesus’ time, and it is true in our day as well. When Jesus was tempted in the desert, Satan offered him all the kingdoms of the world! Satan has the power to offer the kingdoms of this world, because it is the world that satan has most control over. And Jesus rejected Satan and his offer, ushering in the Kingdom of God which is not of this world.

This means that for us, the categories that the world sets up as absolutely important, more important than anything else, are properly rejected by Christians. The world devides people by nation, by ethnicity, by income level, by sexual orientation, by gender, even education level, and by a myriad of other designations. In becoming Christian, we reject this false dividing lines. That is not to say that they are not real within the structures of the world or even in our imperfect church on Earth. But in praying for God’s Kingdom to come, we are saying those boundaries
are meaningless in God’s eyes. In God’s kingdom, the logic of the world is reversed. To be part of God’s Kingdom means to be together with others who may be the “rejects” of the world, worthless according to the logic of the world. After all, Jesus ate with the “sinners” and “tax collectors.”

The prayer continues: **On Earth as it is in heaven.** This is a transition! We are just about to get to some specific requests from God, for basic needs, for forgiveness, and for protection. “On Earth as it is in heaven.” This is not about promising God that we will try our best here on Earth, but rather it is a request for God to make his will known to us! This prefaces anything we ask of God with the proper humility, seeking first God’s will and not our own.

Now we get to down to brass tax: **“Give us today our daily bread.”** This is first and foremost about asking God for our daily physical needs to be met. In praying the Lord’s Prayer, we acknowledge that all that we have comes from God, and that we are completely dependent on God. This cuts against a culture that prizes “self sufficiency.” Of course, none of us are “self sufficient.” Notice again that we are not taught to pray for “my daily bread.” Yes, we pray that God will take care of us, but as Christians we are always a people, and not atomized individuals. Jesus is not our PERSONAL savior, but the savior of all! The bread, that is, our food and our means and our wealth, does not truly belong to us as everything belongs to God. In fact, when Christians want to know what God is like, what Christ is like, they know him in the breaking and the share of bread and cup!

And now, the longest line, **Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.** Here the order is important! We ask for God’s forgiveness. All of us
have hurt others and done wrong in the sight of the Lord! This is inevitable given the fallen nature of humanity. But for Christians, it is in being forgiven by God that we have the strength to forgive others! This is not natural! What is natural is to want revenge, and to want justice! When we are wronged, seriously wronged, our culture teaches us that retaliation and harsh punishments are necessary. Jesus teaches us another way, a harder way, an unnatural way.

When forgiving others, this is not cheap grace. This is not simply pretending that the hurts never happened. In forgiving, as we pray for the strength to do every time we pray the Lord’s prayer, at least two things are going on. First, as Christians, we are not simply being generous to the one who has wronged us, but in fact by offering forgiveness we are indeed honoring God who has forgiven us. An act of forgiveness is both for the person we forgive, and for God! Second, and here is the where the power to change the world comes in, by offering forgiveness Christians, even when we are wronged, can break the cycle of violence and hatred. We can have the courage not to demand an eye for an eye or a tooth for a tooth. Forgiveness casts out hate, and Christian forgiveness comes always from a place of having already been forgiven of much by God.

And, setting aside the doxology for today, the prayer closes with “**save us from the time of trial, and deliver us from evil.**” This should not come as a shock to anyone in this room, but becoming Christian does not guarantee a pain free life, or an answer to every problem. Some branches of Christianity evangelize with a message that can make it seem that way. Perhaps you have seen a sign on a billboard somewhere, or a bumper sticker that says, “Christ is the Answer!” But
what was the question? No, the trials of this life will still be there, be it illness, injury, the difficulty of making a living, marital problems, or anything else. But not only that, in becoming Christian we may encounter problems we otherwise would not have encountered. If we love God above all else, and refuse to bow to the idols of the world, the world takes notice. There is immense pressure for us to see military power as our salvation, or the economy as our salvation, or even the “American Dream” as our salvation. We pray to God to protect us from the trials we might face, particularly in not bowing to this idols of our culture, and we pray from protection from the cosmic forces of evil, including that which might infect our own hearts.

So to my choir friend, I say that our Christian prayers have everything to do with how we live, how we forgive, and what we give our whole heart and soul to. As we prepare to receive the Eucharist this morning, let us pray the Prayer our Lord taught us, not merely by route, but with passion and conviction!