

Holiness: Dare to be Different¹

We move today to the first request in the Lord's Prayer, namely, "Hallowed be thy name." What does that mean? Let's begin by translating "hallowed by thy name," into something more manageable. A good way to say that might be "Father, may your name be made holy."

Isn't it amazing how we can recite something for a lifetime and still not be exactly clear on what we're saying—even when we break down the big words? So, "Father, may your name be made holy," still may not be terribly vivid.

Let's see if we can decode all of this and make it usable.

Let's start with an easy one. This request asks for God's name to be made holy. Who exactly is supposed to do the holy-making? The answer is God. New Testament scholars tell us that whenever in the Old Testament "to make holy" is used in the passive voice, God is the actor. I wouldn't have known that if I hadn't looked it up. So, we don't have to think too hard to get a piece of this clarified. The scholars do it for us. Their work enables us to translate, "Hallowed be thy name," into "Father, we ask you to make your own name holy." So far so good.

But what in the world does "holy" mean? That's one of those religious words that we use with only a vague sense of

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exactly what we're talking about. Holiness means basically separateness. Better, it means set apart for special use. It might carry the idea of different or pure. As I worked on this my mind drifted to a hospital operating room. It's set apart. The operating room is a very special place for a very special task. It's super clean for that task. Holiness carries a similar meaning. The word saint is literally holy one. The saint is different, probably more pure and untainted by the world's values and attitudes.

So let's translate again. Hallowed be thy name means: "Father, we ask you to make your own name special, different, wonderful."

Now we're getting a bit clearer. But why do we ask for God's name to be special? What does mention of the name add to this? Well, if you think about it, God is already holy, set apart, pure, special different by his very nature. We don't need to pray for that. God's name, on the other hand, God's reputation or the handle by which people know about God, could certainly be made special and set apart in people's minds. So, let's translate again. Hallowed be thy name means: "Father, we ask you to make your own reputation in everyone's minds special, different and wonderful."

Here's where the plot thickens. How does God reveal his holiness or differentness to people?" How do people have a special regard for God? Well, it's through what God has done in history in the world. It's mostly through what God has done in his people. To get right down to it God's reputation has around here a whole lot to do with what God has done in us. People look to God's people and they make up their mind what they think of God.

There's a spiritual boomerang here. We throw out the prayer, "hallowed be thy name," and the typical way that God hallows his name is by hallowing his people—that's us.

Look at the lesson from Isaiah, the story of Isaiah's call. Isaiah is in the Temple and has a great vision of the holiness of God. Isaiah immediately senses his own unholiness and his people's unholiness. The vision of God has the effect of revealing his own uncleanness. So Isaiah blurts out woe is me, I've seen the Lord of hosts and I realize I'm a mess. Immediately, God sends an angel with the fire from the altar of sacrifice to purify Isaiah. After Isaiah is purified—made holy—then God sends him on a mission with a special message.

Now here comes a profound theological insight. If you get just one sentence of benefit from getting out of bed this morning and coming to worship here it is. God's various traits

are how God gives us those traits. God's love is how God makes us loving. God's righteousness is how God makes us righteous. And for today, God's holiness is how God makes us holy.

Bottom line: Hallowed by thy name is fundamentally a plea that God will shape us and educate us so that people will see us and think "Praise the Lord—isn't God wonderful."

Some day we ought to sing Morris Chapman's exquisite little hymn:

Christ in us be glorified
Christ in us be lifted high
Let his love be shown
And his praises be known
Let Christ be glorified.

As the meaning of "Hallowed be thy name" comes into view, I can't think of anything more necessary in the world we live in than for there to be a people who are distinct or special. They would be us.

In the middle ages when the world was wracked by disease, poverty, danger, hunger, and constant violence, there developed institutions that preserved dignity and learning and shelter and a living memory of Jesus Christ. I'm thinking of the monastic movement. Christian men and women banded together and set up little societies of mutual respect and Christian ethics. These communities were islands of sanity in an often brutish world.

In many ways the Church, the cathedrals, and monasteries provided a sense of continuity that helped Europe get through that difficult period in history.

We live in a crazy world now. Our world cries out for a people who will live different, yes, holy lives instead of joining the stampede toward whatever is the current rage.

Think of our own church. Over 180 years, we have gathered for worship. Every week, in good times and bad, we live out a calling. The Thursday lunch happens, mission happens, people are welcomed, the Bible is studied. Our calling is to deepen these good things. What if in the next 180 years we came to be known for our love for one another, that we always forgive, that all persons are embraced here, that money, sex, and power are put in their proper places. And so on...I do believe that people would look at us and say, thank God. God is wonderful. When we say hallowed be thy name we're saying deeply with Isaiah. "Here I am Lord, send me."

Brother Sun, Sister Moon

God's holiness is how God makes us holy. And when we pray in the Lord's Prayer for God to make his name holy, we're really praying for God to make us holy, special, set apart for Kingdom us. And you know what? That's a huge relief for a world that needs something different. Hallowed be thy name.