

Hallowed  
Reading from the Old Testament: Psalm 99  
Reading from the Gospels: Matthew 6:9

Hallowed is not a word you commonly use or hear in the course of your days. It sounds like a word reserved for use within the walls of a building at least 400 years old and located in the British Isles. *These hallowed halls*. One of the saints of South Mecklenburg was Ernest Hunter who at 97 entered the church triumphant. Ernest had this mellifluous basso profundo voice that you could imagine being the voice of God. Hallowed would be an Ernest word, requiring so much more gravitas than my midwestern twang could ever hope to conjure.

Hallowed. I just can't pull it off, but along with you, I say it week after week upon the conclusion of the Prayers of the People. It flows easily from our lips, almost reflexively, with little effort and maybe even less cognizance of it's meaning. Hallowed. You have to wonder if those sweaty football teams taking a knee at the fifty-yard line and holding hands have a sense of meaning on their minds as they are praying the Lord's Prayer? Hallowed ... Hal-ya!

Hallowed. **Αγιαζω** is the original Greek word in the Lord's Prayer, meaning - to be made holy, venerated, separated from profane things, sanctified, hallowed. "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by Thy name..." How regularly do you ponder the holiness of God or approach God with an awareness of the holy? Oh, we know all about veneration. David Wilcox manages to satirize our idol worship of our toys and our physiques in the same lyric. "The warm water beads as it runs down the curves of the beautiful surface so tan. She's polishing the Jaguar again." Similarly, Monty Python lampoons the overwrought traditions of royal heraldry as King Arthur summons the *holy hand grenade of Antioch*. "And Saint Attila raised the hand grenade up on high, saying, 'O Lord, bless this thy hand grenade, that with it thou mayst blow thine enemies to tiny bits, in thy mercy.'"

Whether it is your Aunt Myrtle's plastic on the living room couch, the framed Johnny Unitas jersey on your cousin's wall, or the tickets to The Stones' concert in your own trembling hands, we know a bit about the veneration in which our treasures and heroes are held.

But what about the holiness of God? We struggle enough with the contemplation of God alone before we even add the word hallowed. I treated our Bible Study this week with the Westminster Confession's definition of God. "There is but one only living and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions, immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty; most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute..." And that's not all! Yeah, it goes on...

"He is the alone fountain of all being, of whom, through whom, and to whom, are all things; and hath most sovereign dominion over them, to do by them, for them, or upon them, whatsoever himself pleaseth. In his sight all things are open and manifest; his knowledge is infinite, infallible, and independent upon the creature; so as nothing is to him contingent or uncertain." (The Westminster Confession of Faith)

Did you get all that? Yeah, that's about the same reaction I got from the Bible Study group. God ... is ... a lot ... a whole lot ... in fact, as the Confession puts it, God is immeasurable. If you watched the Tour de France recently, that leg-pumping, lung-seizing, rear-ripping bicycle jaunt around France, you were drawn into the race within the race. Yes,

the focus is on the maillot jaune (the yellow jersey) worn by the overall leader, but there is a similarly competitive quest for the polka dot jersey, worn by the rider who has done the best on the mountain stages, where in addition to the typical daily 140 km, the riders must scale the daunting peaks of the Alps and the Pyrenees. Each climb is assigned a classification according to its difficulty: category 4 being the easiest climbs, though I probably couldn't make up a cat. 4 with a Kawasaki. A 3 is more difficult, a 2 is a lot more difficult, and a 1 can make a rider curse the day he was born. But there is another category HC, in French that's hors categorie, or beyond classification. Col du Tourmalet, Alpe du Huez, Luz Ardiden. These climbs are so long (up to 30 km), so steep (a minimum 8% grade), and so brutal it would be reductive, nigh ridiculous to assign something so crude as a number to it. Even the pro riders don't so much climb it as survive it. Hors Categorie - my translation? Don't even think about it.

Beyond classification, beyond description, beyond comprehension, *hallowed be Thy name*. When we speak of God or approach God are we aware we are entering the presence of One so vast, so powerful, so profound, so brilliant whom we can never adequately describe or fully

understand, and certainly not grasp, control, or manipulate?

Incomprehensible. Thomas Merton, the Trappist theologian and mystic, said, "Our belief and love attain to [God], but [God] remains hidden from the arrogant gaze of our investigating mind which seeks to capture [God] and secure permanent possession of [God] in an act of knowledge that gives power over [God]. It is in fact absurd and impossible to try to grasp God as an object which can be seized and comprehended by our minds." (Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*)

Hallowed be Thy name. What is it that we sing? "Immortal, invisible, God only wise; in light inaccessible, hid from our eyes." When Moses, on the mountain of the Lord, turned aside, awed by the ethereal sight of a bush that was burning, yet not consumed, the Lord said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." Later, when Moses asked to see the glory of the Lord, the Lord cautioned him, saying, "I will make all my goodness pass before you ... but you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live." Do we share that sense of the holy as we pray, as we worship, as we seek, and as we walk in the Lord, that "fountain of all being, of whom, through whom, and to whom, are all things?"

My dad was the manager of a utility company and so most of the buildings, sheds, substations, and structures he managed were liberally posted with signs bearing the warning: Danger! High Voltage! The linemen, before climbing those poles would put on all this protective gear - arc flash pants, coats, arc guard harnesses, face shields, thick rubber gloves - knowing that their safety, their lives depended on an unbroken awareness that they were in the presence of tremendous power.

The Psalmist comprehends this when speaking of God's majesty: "The voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire. The voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness; the Lord shakes the wilderness of Kadesh. The voice of the Lord causes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forest bare; and in his temple all say, 'Glory!'"

Sometimes, in our attempts to domesticate or even manage God, we lose a sense of the sacred, forgetting any notion of standing on holy ground. At various points in history we are confronted with truths that demythologize the heroes we revere. We realize we cannot regard their accomplishments without also acknowledging their flaws. While this is true of every human being, this is not the case when we speak of God.

As my theology professor put it, God is not the greatest in a series of beings. It's not like God is Mother Teresa<sup>2</sup>. Remember the image of the mountain. God is HC, hors category, beyond classification. John Leith said, "God is the mystery that encounters us, but God is a mystery we cannot grasp, a mystery that is beyond our knowing unless [God] makes himself known to us." (John Leith, *Basic Church Doctrine*) Theologian Karl Barth said, "God is unique - as Who He is and what he is - while everything else is what it is by Him, and therefore only dependently ... not in a way that competes with God." (Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*) And so it is that Moses and the Israelites sang, "Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?" And so it is that John of Patmos recorded from his vision, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!"

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. You see, it is only when we sense the holiness of God, that we can begin to appreciate the miracle of God's nearness. How amazing is it that the One who threw the stars into the sky, knows you by name, is invested in your life, knows your worries, fears, and hopes? How unfathomably

astonishing is it you can sing *O worship the king, all glorious above ... pavilioned in splendor and girded praise* and *What a Friend We Have in Jesus*, and be speaking of the same God? This dual awareness of the transcendence of God and the immanence of God is what sends us to our knees in humility, thanksgiving, trust, and praise.

Were the whole realm of nature mine,  
That were a present far too small;  
Love so amazing, so divine,  
Demands my soul, my life, my all. (*When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*)

The rough and tumble coarseness of our world veils our sense of the holy. We discount and lose that conscious sense of the omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence of the Almighty God. Reverence succumbs to indifference. Worship ignored inevitably becomes idol worship, or worse, self-worship. The call to hallow God's name is a call for the restoration of reverence.

Michael Fitzpatrick served in the U.S. Army as a chaplain's assistant for five years in Iraq. He was deployed to a military base NE of Baghdad along the Tigris River. Michael was assigned as a LNE (local national escort) supervising Iraqi contractors hired to build a chapel on the base. He says, "Being a Christian teenager working with

Muslim men on a Christian worship facility in their country was definitely a ... clarifying experience!"

Having grown up in a non-denominational evangelical worship tradition, prayer was informal and unstructured. He says, "although we had a corporate time of prayer during Sunday worship, it was still very extemporaneous and disembodied, requiring little more of us than that we close our eyes, bow our heads, and dutifully listen." The idea that one should prepare for prayer was unfamiliar.

However, on his first day of supervising the Iraqi workers, he says, "I heard the dhuhur call to prayer echo from the nearby minaret. One of the workers nearest me walked over and asked if they could have a bottle of water and borrow one of the empty sandbags lying in a pile nearby. Perplexed, I gave my consent if nothing else out of curiosity. He walked a short distance away, placed the sandbag on the ground, and began to pour water over his head, hands, and feet. Once finished, he knelt on the sandbag and began to pray facing Mecca, using this coarse military-issue sack as a makeshift prayer rug." Michael

could hear part of the Iraqi's prayer, noticing repeated phrases and noting that portions of the prayers followed a script.

Michael says, "Scripted prayers were often discouraged in my youth, out of the belief that this made praying insincere. Yet as I watched him stand and bow and proclaim in the hot desert wind, I realized I had never seen a more authentic prayer in my life. This ritual occurred again with the afternoon call to prayer. As I escorted off-base the last of the workers, I found myself wishing that Christianity had structured prayers throughout the day, with bodily motions and shared words."

The experience challenged Michael to get to know his own faith tradition on a deeper level, discovering to his surprise, that yes, we do have structured prayers that go back some 3,000 years when you include both the liturgies of the early church and the psalms and prayers recorded in the Hebrew scriptures. He began to perceive what the author of Ephesians spoke of: "I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and

height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God."

Michael concludes by saying, "My experience of my Muslim friends made me want to be a better Christian, not because it was what I had always known, but because they helped me see I had never really known it. When I came to know it better, I remained in this tradition because it is here, in this Christ, in these sacraments, in these scriptures, that we find the words of eternal life." (Michael Fitzpatrick, *journeywithjesus.net*)

Our Father, who art in heaven; hallowed be Thy name. Amen.