



On Displacing Words: The Lord's Prayer and the New Definition of Justice

VÍTOR WESTHELLE

Omnia vocabula fiunt nova, quando e suo foro in alienum transferuntur.
Martin Luther¹

I. AN EXEMPLARY PRAYER

THE LORD'S PRAYER IS AN EXEMPLARY LITERARY GENRE, INDEED, A UNIQUE FORM of narrative.² It belongs to none of the traditional forms of discourse. It is not an heuristic or an art of dialogue; it is not a pedagogical tool as in the art of catechesis; it is not rhetoric as in the art of persuasion; and it is not a demonstration as in the art of proving. Its uniqueness lies in its intentional linguistic displacement. It transfers words that belong either to profane or to sacred space to another realm, to another and unexpected semantic domain. What seem to be ordinary words assume, as Luther said, a different meaning by being moved outside of their natural ambiance, outside of any established or regulated economy.

¹"All words are made new when they are moved from their place to another." In "Die Promotionsdisputation von Paladius und Tilemann" (1537), *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 60 vols. (Weimar: Herman Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1883–1980) 39/1:231, lines 1-3. Hereafter, cited as WA.

²I will be using the Lord's Prayer in an exemplary fashion, without considering either other prayers in the Christian tradition or prayers in other religions. Its exemplary character is in its very intent, as it was given to the disciples as a model for praying.

In the Lord's Prayer, we are invited to take up Jesus' own stance in relationship to the one he called "father." It is the prayer of the community that lives in Jesus' own stead, partaking in the very life of the triune God.

The limit between the sacred and the profane is transgressed. The holy name is evoked when daily bread is at stake; our trespasses toward the divine are lined up with down-to-earth financial contracts. It is neither a private form of address, belonging to the intimate forum of individuals, nor is it public, in the sense of being uttered in an open forum and available for general scrutiny. Neither a form of sacrifice in which an offering is made without return being negotiated in advance—for the Lord's Prayer is made out of petitions—nor a form of negotiation in which an exchange is sought in the spirit of *do, ut des* ("I give [you], thus you give [me in return]"), the prayer belongs to a different economy. It is neither a form of proclamation nor a sacrament, though it contains elements of both (it is a means of communion and also supposes a promise). It is also not a confession, though it contains doctrinal content. Although it closes with a doxology ("For yours is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever")—most likely later added—it is itself not a pure form of praise, nor is it an argument, driving a point. Not a rational exercise of power nor an avenue to mystical bliss, it is also neither coercive nor disengaged.

The Lord's Prayer, this exemplary form of prayer, can be regarded as a discursive displacement or even misplacement; but it transfers words not only from one place to another, from the rules of one realm to those of another, but to a place that evades familiar rules, to a place between other places, to a neighboring space, a realm perhaps best described by the Greek word *chora* (χώρα): a place lying between spaces or limits; a place that is simultaneously no place, for it is only the limit of other spaces; a place that is itself defined by a transgression. The Lord's Prayer in this "choratic" mode is itself a transgressing gesture, a gesture moving away from the ruled domains of the familiar. But how does this happen?

This "choratic" elusiveness of the genre typified by the Lord's Prayer is important insofar as one wants to recognize the uniqueness of what it does and says. Its irony is that it is offered to the followers of Christ as a model of prayer, when in fact it is not a model or template but the real thing. In other words, what is being offered as a model is precisely that which defies models, that which does not fit into a category and cannot be ruled by a literary, economic, or political genre. This is what makes a prayer—any prayer like the Lord's Prayer—so subversive. It does not fit into a given economy, neither of heaven nor of earth; it partakes of neither and yet of both. The definition of a Christian attributed to Martin Buber somehow describes also what lies at the heart of the Lord's Prayer: "A Christian is this remarkable person who in the midst of an unredeemed world proclaims that its redemption has already occurred." The Lord's Prayer defies the ways of the world and all its rules, against all evidence, yet without abandoning the world. It presents us with neither heaven nor earth, neither the heraldic announcement of otherness nor the sacramental immanence of pure presence, yet it presents both.

II. PRAYER AS MARVELOUS EXCHANGE

The Lord's Prayer is "exemplary" in another way. It is both the prayer that Jesus has given to his disciples, and also Jesus' own prayer; the genitive is both objective and subjective. It is at the same time a legacy to the disciples and also the verbal reenactment in the life of the praying community of Jesus' own existence and relationship to the Father. This is also part of the "choratic" character of the prayer. The praying community not only follows Jesus' command (as it does in the administration of the sacraments and the proclamation of the gospel), but it also positions itself in a relationship to God in heaven as bold as the relationship with God of Jesus himself. This is indeed another way of rephrasing the "wonderful exchange" (*mirabilem mutuacionem*)³ that Luther talks about in his lecture on Isa 53.⁴ The wonderful exchange in the prayer is not that Jesus took our place but that the praying community takes Jesus' place in his relationship to God! The prayer offers the necessary reversed image of surrogate atonement. This prayer is not done in the name of Jesus; it is done in Jesus' own stead!

It is precisely in this lecture on Isa 53 that Luther provides his intriguing definition of justice: "Behold the new definition of justice (*definitionem novam iusticiae*): justice is the knowledge of Christ (*iusticia est cognitio Christi*)."⁵ Again here the genitive is double: justice is to know about Christ and also to have the knowledge that Christ had, i.e., Christ's own relationship to and intimacy with the one in heaven. This is the marvelous exchange: not only that Christ was made sin, but also that the sinner is made into Christ. This is indeed a "transgression" (Luther: *translatio, mutuacionis, transferatio*). What Luther points to as new (*novam*) is the decisive element here. In relationship to what is this new view of justice defined? He—as any one at his time who had a basic education—knew that the *old* and classic definition of justice (as rendered by Cicero, Pliny the Elder, and many others, yet older than them all) was the proverbial *suum cuique* ("to each what to each is due").⁶ This was the prevailing and unquestioned concept of justice. For Luther to suggest a "new" definition was a scandalous subversion of this venerable maxim. His radical rephrasing changes it from "to each what to each is due" to "to us what is not due to us [but comes as a gift]," as well as "to others what is not due to them."

Such is the justice of Christ; and in this is the marvelous exchange, or rather a "mad economy" that escapes the "sound" rationalities of the domains of heaven and of earth—according to the "scribes" who define them. This is what the Lord's Prayer attests to; not only as a text but also as words that we own when we say "*Our*

³Martin Luther, "Lectures on Isaiah" (1527-1530), *Luther's Works*, vol. 17, ed. Hilton Oswald (St. Louis: Concordia, 1972) 225. Hereafter, cited as *LW*. Cf. WA 31/2:435, line 11.

⁴*LW* 17:219-232; WA 31/2:432-440.

⁵This is my translation from WA 31/2:439, lines 19-20. The standard English translation (*LW* 17:230) reads, "You must therefore note this new definition of righteousness. Righteousness is the knowledge of Christ."

⁶Luther actually quotes a version of the maxim, calling it with sarcasm the definition of the sophists: "Iusticia est constans voluntas reddenti cuique, quod suum est." WA 31/2:439, lines 5-6. In English translation (*LW* 17:229): "The sophists say that righteousness is the fixed will to render to each his own."

Father....” When we utter these words, we take the place of Jesus in his relationship to God. Concern with inclusive language should not detract us from the primary point: in our saying the prayer, even more important than the one being addressed is the stance we take, our positioning ourselves in relationship to the one Jesus called *abba*/Father. We are not filling a list of requests that needs to be processed before delivered (“for your Father knows what you need before you ask,” Matt 6:8). The praying gesture to which Jesus invites his followers is much more radical. He invites us to claim for ourselves the relationship that he had with his God. We are urged to claim with boldness that which otherwise and by the prevailing standards of justice does not belong to us. Jesus invites his followers neither to the heaven of the mystics nor to the vale of tears of a paradise lost but to the very quotidian world that receives and is made worthy of God’s abundant and extraordinary love. The justice, the righteousness, of Christ is to stand in Jesus’ place, which is the right place and the place that makes one right in relationship to God (*coram deo*) and the world (*coram mundo*).

III. THE PRAYER

1. Address

In the prayer there is an addressee. However, the address is not the opening of a letter, a memo, or a diary entry; it is both an address and a common acknowledgment of ownership and belonging. “Our” establishes, but does not define, the limit of belonging and ownership. What follow is thus both a “transaction” and the annulment of all commerce; it is a dialogue in which the response comes before the address.⁷ After this, the structure of the composition, with the seven petitions (in Matthew’s version; Luke’s has five), reveals an internal design. It entails a triadic frame. Reflecting the cosmology of the time, the prayer unfolds its contemporary conception of the cosmos as divided into a three-tiered universe: heaven, earth, and the underworld. These are represented in the prayer by the main sections that deal almost symmetrically with (a) the transcendence of God, (b) the every-day life, and (c) the reality of evil. Petitions 1 and 2 refer to God’s own domain. They ask for God’s name to be sanctified and for God’s kingdom to come. Petition 3, that God’s will be done (which is not in Luke’s version), marks a transition to the earthly domain of everyday life, but most importantly establishes the connection between the two realms. The petition that God’s will be done marks a crucial move, one seen in the coming grammatical move from the second person singular to the first person plural, which expresses the main concerns of the petitions that follow.

2. Petitions 1-3

As the address implicitly fulfills the First Commandment, the first petition implies the fulfillment of the Second Commandment. God’s name should not be

⁷Even if the word “our” is missing in most and the most important of Luke’s codices, the plural form is implied by the rest of the text.

taken in vain. The enactment of the petition itself fulfills the commandment; it does what it says by its very enunciation. Sanctifying the name of God fulfills two functions: First, it does this by not naming God. Calling God "father" establishes a *relationship* to this one who remains without a proper name that we could dispose of.⁸ Second, it daringly invites the community into Jesus' own "choratic" place, to stand in relationship to God as Jesus stood, in both a filial and in a servant position. Only with this courage to be in Jesus' own stead does the Lord's Prayer make sense at all.

The second petition emphasizes that the rule, the *basileia*, the economy that we hope for is God's and not even remotely an amelioration of anything with which we might be familiar. Jesus the Jew here professes with radical sharpness the otherness, the alterity, of God and of God's ways. To pray for the kingdom is exactly to pray for the end of this world and of whatever we are in the midst of it, including our own earnest calling and vocation. With this awareness, Saint Jerome is said to have prayed that the kingdom would not come soon, for he had not fulfilled the duties of his calling.

However, here comes the surprise, one easily seen by comparing Matthew's version to Luke's. Luke shares the two first petitions with Matthew but then moves directly from the second to the petition regarding daily bread. Luke's move could indeed be misread as a *do, ut des* sort of proposition: I honor God and ask for the otherworldly kingdom to come, but now it is God's turn to deliver. Matthew's inclusion of the third petition functions to call attention to something that is tacit in Luke but spelled out in Matthew. We move from the realm of the second person singular to the first person plural, from God's aseity (what is proper to God's own self) to the God-human relationship. The sequence is not "your kingdom come...give *me my* daily bread." The third petition in Matthew lifts up the fact that what happens in the move from God's realm to our everyday life is not a transaction; it is not a *do, ut des* proposition. I am not praying for me, I am not asking for me, though I am the one hallowing God's name and asking for the kingdom to come.

The third petition emphasizes that at both ends, in transcendent heaven above and in day-to-day life on earth, it is still God's will that will be done. This is what excludes the possibility of rendering the prayer in the first person. Use of the first person would make it impossible to avoid the notion that the praying person is proposing a *do, ut des* negotiation. But though God's will excludes my personal will, it does not exclude the possibility that God's will is also the will of a collective, of an assembly of others among whom I am included by the fact of enunciating the prayer in the first person plural. The third petition of Matthew provides for the transition in the asymmetric move from the second person singular to the first person plural, suggesting that there is no contradiction between God's will and the

⁸The Lord's Prayer is the best argument for not using "father" as a proper name of God.

collective need of the people to have sustenance, freedom, and safety (the topics of the next petitions), while, however, excluding the possibility of a personal transaction between the deity and the individual praying. The bread we pray for is ours, not mine; the debt is ours, not mine; the trial is ours, not mine; the evil comes upon us, not only me. The third petition says that while there is an infinite and absolute difference between God and me, the difference between God and “us” is no longer infinite, but relative. Though God is in heaven and I am on earth, it is also true that *we* can be in Christ’s place, the *chora* neighboring both heaven and earth.

3. *Petitions 4-5*

How to define the contours of this plural—who is in and who is out—is of course the question. This is what the fourth and the fifth petitions are about. The “we” are those who have not assured their means of sustenance in one way or another. Bread here is a metonymy for food, shelter, health, security, government, and all that is implied by our daily needs.⁹ The “we” can be very broad, but it excludes those who are assured each day of their fate (or think they are). This is what the fourth petition tells us. The “we” here are all those who recognize their need to be sustained. This petition sets us in a creature-creator relationship. Whatever we have that provides for our sustenance, for the ambiance in which we can exist, is God’s continuing creation.¹⁰ The “we” are all those who recognize their indebtedness to God as their creator and sustainer. Here the first person plural is theocentrically defined. No one is excluded except those who do not recognize themselves as creatures in constant dependence on God’s creation.

The theme of this petition is closely linked to the feeding of the five thousand (Mark 6:35-44). In that text the “we” emerges as those who are willing to share the scarce resources they have, in opposition either to having the crowd dismissed to go to find something to eat for themselves or having food bought and provided for them. Jesus’ alternative to the disciples’ proposals was to see what was available and then share it among all. This made that crowd a “we.”

However, the fifth petition offers a more restrictive definition of the “we.” Here we are presented with some considerable problems in translation and also significant variations in the two versions, Matthew and Luke. Matthew uses the same root verb (ὀφείλω) to describe both what we need to be forgiven and what we need to forgive. Luke distinguishes between our debts to God (ἁμαρτία, missing

⁹Luther’s definition in the Small Catechism is classic: Daily bread means “[e]verything included in the necessities and nourishment for our bodies, such as food, drink, clothing, shoes, house, farm, fields, livestock, money, property, an upright spouse, upright children, upright members of the household, upright and faithful rulers, good government, good weather, peace, health, decency, honor, good friends, faithful neighbors, and the like.” In *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 357.

¹⁰Luther’s commentary on the First Article of the Creed in the Large Catechism is strikingly similar to his commentary on the Fourth Petition in the Small Catechism. He writes: “I hold and believe that I am God’s creature, that is, that he has given me and constantly sustains my body, soul, and life, my members great and small, all my senses, my reason and understanding, and the like; my food and drink, clothing, nourishment, spouse and children, servants, house and farm, etc.” In *The Book of Concord*, 432.

the mark, sinning) and human indebtedness (ὀφείλω), using the same term as Matthew. Although ὀφείλω and its derivatives have an array of acceptations, its primary sense (unlike ἁμαρτία) is economic; it implies a financial obligation, even if its meaning can be and has been metaphorically extended. However, this primary sense of the Greek term, which implies a clear financial indebtedness, is lost in both common English versions of the Lord's Prayer. If the prayer in English purports to follow Matthew's parallelism (by using the same word for both the relationship to God and relationship to the neighbor), then neither "sin" nor "trespass" conveys the primary meaning. Closer would be to render it as "debt."

If Luke's version were to be followed, then the relationship to God should be described as one marked by sin, but the relationship to others is still described basically as one of an economic and financial nature. Whether following Matthew's straight parallelism or Luke's asymmetric version, the point is that the petition for God to cancel our debt, guilt, or sin toward Godself, is predicated upon our annulment of the debt of others toward us. Whatever translation we choose, at least the second part of the petition needs to include explicit fiscal implications. This is the radical proposal put forward. If it is easy to understand that the *do, ut des* is cancelled *coram deo* (in relationship to God), the prayer warns *us* that this occurs *insofar as* (ὥς) it is cancelled *coram hominibus* (in relationship to our fellow creatures).

The *Sitz im Leben* of such a daring statement is the year of Jubilee as presented in Lev 25. It is highly unlikely that boldly forgiving debtors and setting free those in bondage was carried out in any significant scale or on a regular basis as prescribed (see, e.g., Jer 34:8-22). For Jesus, the "we" who do forgive debts are certainly those who understand themselves to be the faithful remnant of Israel, those who kept the Jubilee tradition. The spiritualizing that the prayer suffers in English translation (and other languages as well) makes it easier to recite, but harder to remain faithful to Jesus' vision of what it means to have God's will "be done on earth as in heaven." Finally, in the prayer we are asking only for God to treat us in the way that we treat our neighbors; this is the implicit limit of our own courage to pray. Jesus' introductory words to the prayer, making it clear that God already knows our needs, excludes the possibility of equating the amount of God's forgiveness with our capability of forgiving. But it does imply that what we don't forgive is therefore excluded from our petition as well. It only means that what we do not forgive is precisely that which keeps us from asking what we were invited to ask; it keeps us away from the place Jesus has invited us to take. We are not excluded from grace; we are excluding ourselves from communion, from the bold gesture of taking Jesus' stead.

Now that the debt crisis of many poor nations of the world is carrying their economies to insolvency and their citizens to starvation and epidemics, the sharpness of this petition becomes close to unbearable. Would a meeting of the G-8 group or of the World Bank be opened or closed with a prayer that says literally, "forgive us our debts (or sins), as we forgive our debtors"? Praying the Lord's

Prayer at such a meeting in the commonly used English versions (that replace debt by sin or trespass) would at least have the merit of avoiding hypocrisy, but it certainly would not contribute to authenticity, nor would it be faithful to the text. However, the new awareness of the global economic crisis should not mask the fact that any one of us still faces the challenge of being able to recite this petition earnestly and to step boldly into Jesus' place. We remain as beggars in face of God, knowing that we can expect the unexpected, for we also have caught ourselves, in joyful embarrassment, doing the unexpected.

4. *Petitions 6-7*

The final two petitions (Luke omits the last one) slide again into another realm, a realm that is neither from God (petitions 1 and 2), nor one in which we share responsibility in the toils of quotidian life (petitions 4 and 5), but one that acknowledges a power capable of damaging life: that which is evil itself.¹¹ After stating what belongs properly to God, the prayer moved boldly to the human realm, speaking about our daily sustenance and the justice to which we are committed. Now it finally asks for deliverance from that which does not come from God and is not something that we can undo, even through our faithfulness.

The formulation of the sixth petition in both Matthew and Luke is kept in an anti-dualistic mode so as to not attribute to this third realm an authority apart from God. It does not say, "Save us from the time of trial" (as in the modern English version); it says, "Lead us not into probation." The sixth petition is indeed Job's plea. This is arguably the shortest biblical "response" to the theodicy question. It is at once a confession of our inability to address the theodicy question and our only answer to it. The petition is so well crafted (identical in Luke and in Matthew) that it avoids attributing evil to God, on the one hand, and postulating another power that would be against God, on the other. (The latter would be Manichean, and not far from the modern English version.) The petition is quite likely aware of Epicurus's famous syllogism (given evil, if God is good then God is not almighty, and if God is almighty then God is not good), for it avoids both attributing evil to God and allowing another entity to emerge. What is here presented implicitly is a version in a nutshell of Luther's hidden God, the one we cannot know and about whom we should not speculate. In confidence the prayer recognizes our inability to know who is this God that exceeds our comprehension, yet trusts in the one revealed in Jesus Christ and by Jesus Christ.

This brings us to the last petition according to Matthew's version (but omitted in Luke), which closes any possibility of misinterpreting the previous petition. This petition is the most radical of all, making explicit what is implied in the former. The Lord's Prayer concludes with the final gesture of its "mad economy," of the marvelous commerce that it suggests: it pleads for the end of evil. As the prayer of Christ, the prayer of the one who is truly God, in full communion with

¹¹Note that the Greek τοῦ πονηροῦ can be the genitive either of πονηρόν (evil in a moral, social, or natural sense) or of πονηρός ("the evil one," "the devil").

the deity, and given as a legacy to the community that takes his place, it is proclaiming a simple and shocking message: there shall be evil no more. This means the end of the possibility of even thinking about a final condemnation. If evil is to be no more, then not even judgment and punishment can be everlasting, for if they were, their cause would equally be everlasting. Even if in the previous petition the existence of what could be called hell, the place of probation and punishment, is presupposed, here the plea is that this hell might be empty and its consummating power be nullified, preempted, and rendered superfluous. The community that prays that God's will be done on earth as in heaven concludes by asking for no other power to be outside God's good will on earth and in heaven. Let the devil "be," let hell burn, but nothing will be under their power; this is the final petition: that evil will be no more. That evil will be no more is an absolute claim. It excludes retaliation as it also excludes deterrence; that evil will be no more implies the end of the *lex talionis* ("the eye for an eye" mode of reasoning). We can pray for this in the confession that we are not yet there. But we should only dare to pray this petition if we are ready—or at least willing—to be taken there.

IV. CONCLUSION

All words change when they move from their semantic home to another realm. Luther's comment came in the context of using the vernacular, everyday language to praise God. My point has been not so much what happens when a word is moved from one semantic field to another, but what happens to words when they inhabit the bordering space of these fields, neither heaven nor earth, yet both: a place between spaces, a *chora*. This is the Lord's Prayer: words that are not only displaced to somewhere else, but also misplaced into a realm that is not proper to any of the familiar fields, neither the sacred nor the profane. It is the place of Jesus. His exemplary prayer is not a template for other prayers; as a model of prayer, it is an invitation to step into Jesus' own place and understand that we are invited to take up his stance in relationship to the one whom he called "father." It is in this "place" (*chora*) that we move around and about (*peri-*) in the power of the Spirit, living out this *perichoresis*. This is why the Lord's Prayer is the prayer of the community that lives in Jesus' own stead, partaking in the very life of the Triune God. ⊕

VÍTOR WESTHELLE is professor of systematic theology at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago.