

Engage360 Episode 132 | Reimagining Prayer in the Wilderness; D.J. Marotta

[00:00:00] **Don Payne:** Hi friends. Welcome again to Engage360. This is Denver Seminary's podcast. I'm your host, Don Payne, and we're very grateful that you have taken a little bit of time to join us for today's conversation. Several times I have seen reality TV shows that chronicle someone taking someone else's old beat-up car and, sneaking it away to a professional auto restoration shop, and then surprising the owner with the gift of their dilapidated car restored to showroom condition. It is a wonderful gift. Anytime someone can take from us something familiar or forgotten or neglected and then give it back to us fresh. And so, our guest in this episode, pastor and author Dan Marotta has done just that for us with the Lord's Prayer in his recent book entitled *Liturgy in the Wilderness, How the Lord's Prayer Shapes the Imagination of the Church in a Secular Age*. This was released last year, 2022, by Moody Press. And Dan, we're really grateful to have the opportunity to have a conversation with you.

[00:01:33] **DJ Marotta:** Thank you, Don. Good to be talking to you and to see your face again.

[00:01:36] **Don Payne:** Yeah, Dan actually graduated from Denver Seminary with an MDiv a few years back and serves now as the rector, actually the founding rector, of Redeemer Anglican Church in Richmond, Virginia, so he's coming to us from Richmond as we speak. Dan, tell us just a little bit about yourself and Redeemer Anglican and then what prompted you to write this book.

[00:02:01] **DJ Marotta:** Sure, so I'm married to my wife Rachel. We are high school sweethearts, been married for 16 years, but have been very keen on each other ever since junior prom. Yeah, we have four incredible kids, two girls and two boys, ages five all the way up to age 12 and just got a puppy. And so, our house is loud and noisy and chaotic.

[00:02:27] **Don Payne:** And maybe a bit messy and hairy

[00:02:30] **DJ Marotta:** And messy. Yep. All the things. Our family moved to Richmond, Virginia back in 2016 to plant Redeemer. And so, the church is now a little over seven years old and it has grown. It's thriving. We've got a great staff now. And actually, our church was able to send me away on sabbatical last summer, and so I feel like our family has just made it through this really big transition from one chapter to a new one.

[00:02:57] **Don Payne:** Glad for you. Glad that you could enjoy that gift of a good sabbatical. So, what prompted you to write this book on the Lord's Prayer, Dan?

[00:03:08] **DJ Marotta:** So yeah, that's a fair question. Books always have stories behind them. So, this book began as a series of teachings that I gave to our parish during spring of 2020, during the COVID lockdown. And so, in the midst of, you know, if you can kind of cast your imagination back into that time, so much fear, so much uncertainty, people grasping around for some source of stability. And so, my desire as a priest was to take our people back to the Lord's Prayer and to give people a means of praying on their own because we could no longer gather together to pray. And to help people understand the value of liturgical prayer. And that might be a strange thing for an Anglican priest to say, because if it's an Anglican church, of course people should value liturgical prayer, right? And yet, you'd be surprised. And so, really this was a chance to sort of do a deep dive into what does the habit of liturgical prayer actually do to us? What does it do to our imaginations? And therefore, what does it do to the rest of the human person? Because we tend to live out of our imaginations. And so, there's kind of like a phrase that the book explores, which is from imagination

springs desires, and from our desires flow our actions. As we repeat our actions, they wear grooves into habits. Once we have a set of habits, we then tend to go looking for beliefs to justify our habits. And then once we have a set of beliefs, we need people to share those beliefs with us. We gather a community around us. And then once we have a community of shared belief, we tend to solidify those beliefs into doctrines. And I'm not saying that's how all doctrines come about, certainly not, but that is how people, just regular human beings, tend to go about deciding what they do, and who they're with, and what they believe, and what their, kind of the shape of their life is. But it all starts in the imagination. And that's important for prayer, because prayer is an aspect of our life with God that speaks directly to the imagination, where we are both expressing to God that which we imagine to be good. And then if we're listening carefully, receiving from God that which is hopefully better and truly good. And so, most of life for a follower of Jesus is lived downstream from whatever their prayer life is cultivating in their imaginations.

[00:05:42] **Don Payne:** I love the way you put that. Living downstream from whatever our prayer life has cultivated in our imaginations. May want to return to that. As an Anglican pastor, priest in a liturgical setting, obviously the Lord's Prayer is a standard part of worship liturgy, but I'm curious what you have observed over your years of ministry about how people tend to engage the Lord's Prayer.

[00:06:07] **DJ Marotta:** Yeah, so I think the Lord's Prayer is for anybody who kind of grew up around church it's sort of so familiar, so overly familiar that it tends to not just get a lot of attention. It's kind of like a treasure hidden in plain sight. I think there are some people who, they see the Lord's Prayer, or they hear other people pray it in church, or they're kind of around it. And they think, well, you know, I prayed that once, or I prayed that a dozen times, time to move on to something else. Right? Or you have people who are real deep into the liturgical habit of praying using other people's words. Maybe they pray the Lord's Prayer every Sunday, maybe they pray the Lord's Prayer every day. But they do it in an unthoughtful way without the heart or the imagination being engaged, they move the mouth, but that's the only part of them that is moved. And so, you have the kind of the dismissers on one side, you know, I prayed the Lord's prayer, nothing happened, not doing it again. And then you have the kind of thoughtless kind of wrote people on the other side. And the analogy I often use with people is at least for folks that are married is kind of thinking of the Lord's prayer as something like going on a date with your spouse. If I'm sitting in my office and a couple comes in and they're having marriage problems and they say, well, you know, we tried going on a date once and nothing great happened. Any of us who've been married for a while, I would say, well, that's not how it works. You really have to repeat this over and over again. You've got to spend a lot of time together, right? And I would say the same thing to those who dismiss the Lord's Prayer. Like the power in this is actually found in the repetition, not just in a one-time thing.

[00:07:43] **Don Payne:** Do you think that is maybe partially because of expectations people bring to prayer that something magical or quasi magical should happen when they pray and if it doesn't then, well I guess that was a swing and a miss. Do you experience that as expectations people have about prayer?

[00:08:01] **DJ Marotta:** Absolutely. Oh yeah. And I'm certainly guilty of that too. I mean, I wouldn't want to put myself in a different category than anybody else. We're all instinct gratification people and I certainly bring that instinct to prayer just like everybody else does. But I think you and I, and I'm sure many listeners would know that part of the gift of prayer is that it changes us. Prayer forms us, and it shapes us, and we are often the recipient of the goodness of our prayers, meaning that the act itself is formative. The act of praying itself changes me and my relationship to God.

[00:08:36] **Don Payne:** How do you help people balance that out with the risk that they could think that prayer is just self-therapy? I'm just talking to myself, I'm making myself feel better, but I'm you know, just kind of circulating the air within the same room but balancing the formative aspect that you just described with the fact that God does in fact, declare that he responds to us, that there is a divine interaction going on there. How do you help folks keep both of those in view?

[00:09:06] **DJ Marotta:** Oh, that's such a good question. And I think this is one of those moments where it's probably difficult at times to give a balanced teaching on it. It's almost easier to do this in a counseling setting. Because you can then listen to what kind of person do you have in front of you, and what are their particular struggles. So, if I'm sitting with someone who leans really far to the charismatic end of the spectrum, and they have this like, incredible expectation for how the Holy Spirit will act in response to their prayers then that's great. They're already predisposed to lean in that direction. And then as a counselor, I might be able to help guide them towards rounding out the fullness of their kind of prayer picture and go, yeah, but there's also a formative nature to prayer. Prayer actually goes to work on you as you pray it. It's not just about God acting. It's about what prayer does to you. But depending on who's in front of you might have somebody who leans totally to the other side of the spectrum and they're going oh, yeah, I go to mindfulness sessions all the time. And if that's where they tend to lean, then there's an opportunity to say, well, here's how prayer is different than mindfulness. Here's how prayer is different than simply meditating in a kind of neo-Buddhist sense. You're actually engaging with a living being and you better go into this expecting a response because every once in a while, you may very well get one. Maybe what I'm trying to say is in the book, I'm not trying to lean only towards one side or the other side of the spectrum because, just pastorally I really want to try to help people be more healthy and balanced and therefore I need to gauge my teaching based on where they tend to lean.

[00:10:48] **Don Payne:** Yeah, well pastorally, that's very wise, Dan. You know, you open your book by saying that we will never get out of the wilderness and that wilderness is the rule not the exception for following Jesus. I love that line and of course it speaks to the title of the book, Liturgy in the Wilderness. But could you say more about that, about wilderness being the rule for our lives not the exception and how the Lord's Prayer begins to fit into that.

[00:11:19] **DJ Marotta:** This is one of those parts of the book that I think probably would have played really well in a different era of history, maybe in a different country, but I think probably does not play very well in the 21st century in the United States. American folk, and I'm just talking to myself here, are just not interested in conceiving of life as a pilgrimage or a sojourn through a long and difficult place. We've already mentioned instant gratification, but I want the kingdom of God right now. I would like the blessings right now. And being told to wait is just difficult. I mean, you and I are having this interview during the season of Advent. We're in a whole season defined by waiting right now. And so, what I'm trying to get at when I open the book and say you'll never get out of the wilderness, stop trying, is really to do a little bit of Biblical theology and say, look, for the people of Israel, they're enslaved in Egypt. God, through his servant Moses, comes along, sets them free. He takes them through the waters of the Red Sea. And then he brings them to Mount Sinai, he gives them instruction in his law, and they're on their way to the Promised Land. But first, where do they go? First, they go to the wilderness. And that narrative arc is the same narrative arc that any Christian today would go through in their journey of faith. There we are, we're enslaved to sin, incapable of rescuing ourselves. And God comes to us through Christ, and he sets us free from slavery to sin. He begins to instruct us and teach us in how to be his people, how to live obediently. And we're on our way to the promised land. But we're not there yet, which means where are we? We're in the wilderness. That's where we are in the story, and we get all bent out of shape when we forget where we are. Either we're trying to get back to Egypt because things felt maybe more

immediately gratifying there, or we're trying to get ahead in the story and see if we can get to Canaan now and not have to wait longer. And so, by situating the whole book as this prayer of Jesus, the Lord's prayer, is a gift, a habit, a formative practice given to his people to sustain them on their pilgrimage through the wilderness. It's a way of just trying to help the reader, hopefully breathe a deep sigh of relief and go, okay, this is why my life feels the way it feels.

[00:13:57] **Don Payne:** To normalize that a little bit, huh?

[00:14:00] **DJ Marotta:** Absolutely. To normalize it and to help people understand that prayer is not a means of getting out of the wilderness, which I think is how a lot of Christians tend to use it.

[00:14:11] **Don Payne:** That is huge. Prayer is not a means of getting out of the wilderness.

[00:14:17] **DJ Marotta:** I just know that's the temptation for me.

[00:14:18] **Don Payne:** Well, yeah. For whom is it not, right? But counter to that, if prayer is not a means of getting out of the wilderness, how would you articulate the alternative to that? Prayer is the means of...

[00:14:34] **DJ Marotta:** Learning what God has set before me while I am in the wilderness. And again, I'm going back to the Old Testament. Why does God keep his people in the wilderness before he takes them into the promised land? It's not because he's capricious. It's not because God is mean and he just is slapping them on the wrist and, you know, doesn't want them to have good things or doesn't want them to enjoy life. Israel still has all of these Egypt habits in them. They're not ready. They're not ready to be their own people in their own land just yet. It's a little bit cutesy, but there's that old saying, you know, it only took a day to get Israel out of Egypt, but it took 40 years to get Egypt out of Israel. There's a little bit of that sense going on.

[00:15:18] **Don Payne:** There's a lot of truth in that. It takes all my life to get me out of me.

[00:15:26] **DJ Marotta:** That's right. So, you know, just speaking autobiographically, I would maybe offer this to any listeners that, you know, at least for me, Christ has set me free from slavery to sin. And yet, oh my, do I backslide all the time. I still have so much of the sin habits just ingrained in me. And part of why the Lord has me in the wilderness of this life is to invite me on this long and slow journey of learning to obey Him. The New Testament language is leaving behind the old self, taking on the new but that's not a one-time thing. That's a practice.

[00:16:03] **Don Payne:** Yeah, not at all. So, let's break it down a little bit. In your book, you beautifully walk through every piece of the Lord's Prayer, every section of it. What do you think are some of the radical or the countercultural, the counterintuitive messages that each part of the Lord's Prayer sends to us? How is it really flipping us around with each of the petitions?

[00:16:32] **DJ Marotta:** This is just the danger with things that are overly familiar is you can say the words and they just don't register. And so, part of the purpose of the book is to just help people slow down and marinate on each word and just think about the implications of what's being said. So, a good example is just the first word, our. And I do a whole little excursus on the word our. The disciples come to Jesus. They say, Lord, teach us to pray. And this is a really normal question for any disciple to ask their rabbi. Jesus was not the only rabbi walking around the Mediterranean in the first

century. There are other rabbis at this time. They have their disciples. It's pretty normal for a rabbi to teach his disciples to pray. So, the disciples are just asking a normal question. They weren't gearing up for a big moment. They were just asking what you would normally ask your rabbi. Teach us to pray. What's your take, Jesus? Give us your take on prayer. And Jesus says, okay, when you pray, say our. And I think that word our just is sort of like a ledge through a doorway threshold that's like just a little too high and I keep stubbing my toe on it. Because I think there are two different kinds of people. There's the my god people. And then there's what I call like the Mr. God sir people. In other words, folks that tend to have an overly intimate, an overly chummy relationship with God and then folks that tend to have an overly formal professional relationship with God. Okay. And you know, there's probably more than two, but people fall off the horse on all kinds of different sides. And that word our is a challenge to everybody. If I'm tempted towards an overly chummy relationship with God, it's just me and Jesus. And we're having this conversation. That word our challenges me and says every prayer I pray has implications for other human beings. It's never ever just me and God, ever. It always includes and implicates brothers and sisters in Christ and neighbors and enemies and all the other people that Christ called me to love and be with. And so that word our just kind of scoops in all of those people and doesn't let me pray a just, you know, my God prayer. And to the overly professional person, that word our is a word of intimacy. It implicates Jesus as the older brother, me and others as the younger siblings, God as father, that's the next word, father. And so, to the overly formal person, it says no, no, no, no. You're coming to your father, and you're coming with your siblings, and you're coming through Christ, your older brother. This is an intimate conversation. This is not a professional conversation. And so that word our is a challenge, but it's a different kind of challenge depending on who you are and what your disposition is.

[00:19:20] **Don Payne:** Yeah. Pick out one more from the prayer and tell us how it radically turns us around.

[00:19:28] **DJ Marotta:** Just one more. Yeah. You're, only going to get long winded answers from me.

[00:19:31] **Don Payne:** That's okay.

[00:19:34] **DJ Marotta:** So, the phrase, give us this day our daily bread is probably the line that most people resonate with because it's the line where we start asking God for stuff. And I would confess that probably 95 percent of my prayers are just me asking God for stuff, and I have to be reminded there are other kinds of prayer besides just asking. That word bread is such a biblically rich word and bread is summative. And it's also symbolic. I think it was Martin Luther the great reformer who, I won't be able to quote it verbatim, but he has this wonderful description of what he thinks daily bread means and the Lord's prayer. And he goes in this incredibly long, like grocery list of it means a good job and good neighbors and food on the table and a beautiful wife and loving children. Like just this list of all this great stuff. And he's like, that's daily bread. It's everything you need and everything you want. I think he even includes like a pint of good beer. But bread is also symbolic. It represents God's provision. And then from our vantage point in history, we might think not only about the manna that God provided for his people in the wilderness, but we also might think of the Lord's Supper, Holy Communion, the Eucharist, and the way that God feeds and nourishes his people with bread. And so, one of the points I make about that prayer is it's traditional for followers of Jesus to pray the Lord's Prayer as a part of a church worship service. And shortly after you pray, give us this day our daily bread, a minister of the church will then put a piece of bread in your hands and say to you, the body of Christ. And so that prayer could get answered actually very quickly, right after you pray it.

[00:21:19] **Don Payne:** I never thought about that, but I will next Sunday. I promise.

[00:21:23] **DJ Marotta:** There you go. But there's a really important point of clarification, which is your prayer for daily bread is not being answered because somebody put physical bread into your hands. Your prayer is being answered because that physical bread in the Lord's supper actually carries with it the real presence of Christ and it's Christ who is our daily bread. And so, the full answer to the prayer, give us this day our daily bread is Jesus. Not so much all of the stuff that we tend to want. And so, bread is operating as this sacrament in the moment, and therefore it carries with it the real presence of Jesus. And so, when I'm praying to God give us this day our daily bread and then I received the Lord's Supper it's like this double answer, where all one level I'm going, oh, I asked, and the Lord answered. That's amazing. And on another level, I'm going, I asked, but actually what I really needed was Jesus.

[00:22:27] **Don Payne:** He gave me himself.

[00:22:27] **DJ Marotta:** And I'm being reminded. Yeah. There it is. Yeah. And in that sense, the prayer takes me right to the gospel.

[00:22:34] **Don Payne:** Wow. Well, I'm going to let those be teasers for people to get your book and read your comments about every piece of the Lord's prayer, which I really want them to do. With some of the time we have left, Dan, I want to ask you about, or return to this concept of imagination. I'm going to quote you here on page 18, you say, if the first symptom of the secular age is anxiety, the second is a diminished imagination. So, your book is framed as you've already commented, your book is framed around the concept of re-imagining and around the formative power of imagination. So, what are some of the significant ways that the Lord's prayer reshapes us by rekindling our imagination?

[00:23:19] **DJ Marotta:** So, here's the hypothesis that this book is based on, that as I pray, I create in my own mind, an expectation of the good, the desirable life, the life that I'm hoping for. And all people do this. Even people who aren't Christians, who don't think they pray, they still do this. There's still that imagined good life that you're longing for and hoping for. And when you think about that and you meditate on it and dwell on it, you're in a sense praying on it. Even if you don't yet know that you're in conversation with God about your desires. So, it's that imagined good life. That then animates and drives so much of what you do. That's what I meant when I said earlier that we sort of live all of life downstream from our imaginations. Now, if instead of just praying the first thing that comes to mind which is fine or only doing extemporaneous prayer, prayers made up on the spot, personally, which, again, is fine, and there's a role and a place for that, if instead I appropriate the Lord's Prayer and begin to pray that, holding it forth in my imagination as the thing I truly desire, which, total confession here, some days is true and some days is not true, right? That's not always what I actually desire. But I'm holding it forth, saying, this is what I really want. Then slowly over time, my affections will begin to orient and shape around that prayer because I'm holding it up as the vision of the good life. And the hypothesis is downstream from that, my actions, and habits, and community, and beliefs, and eventually my whole life begins to be shaped by that thing. And so, if you really want to change a person, then you have to go to work on whatever their vision is of the good life. And the place where that work happens is prayer. Which is why the Lord's Prayer is so important, and always has been, in the life of a Christian in the church.

[00:25:30] **Don Payne:** Okay, Dan, I think somewhere in the book you use the word subversive, or you talk about things in that kind of way. Say a little more about why or how you think the Lord's Prayer functions subversively.

[00:25:45] **DJ Marotta:** That word subversive is such a controversial word, isn't it? We don't like that word in Christian books. So, I framed that in opposition to three other words. Passive, aggressive, and defensive. And so, the defensive, passive, and aggressive being the three normative postures towards anything that is different from you. Whether it's a child encountering a spoonful of broccoli, or a person encountering a grizzly bear in the wilderness. Like, when you encounter something that is different from you and you don't think you like it, defensive, passive, or aggressive are the three normative responses. And psychologists would say, okay, yeah, like freeze or fight or flight. Same thing. Subversive is therefore a fourth and different way of engaging. Subversion is not fighting directly head on, it's not fleeing in defense, and neither is it acquiescing or just kind of going with the flow. Subversive work is usually imagination work. Because it seeks to offer something better or something more appealing, more alluring, more beautiful in place of the other things. You know, if you're trying to get a kid to eat their broccoli, you can threaten them, you can plead with them, you can bribe them. There are all sorts of ways you can get a kid to do something they don't want to do. The subversive way is the way that actually most parents stumble into kind of automatically, which is you say, here comes the airplane, right? And you start working on their imagination. They're like, oh, airplanes. I love airplanes. Right. Before you know it, they're eating broccoli. Yeah. Congratulations. You have subverted your child, and they are now eating their vegetables. Right. And I'm not trying to be too, you know, glib here, but God does this with us. God knows that we're stubborn and resistant, and he's a kind and gentle parent. And he often would rather win us over with beauty than beat us over the head with punishment. And the Lord's Prayer is beautiful. It speaks to the things that we long for the most. Kind of the deepest longings of the human heart. And God would rather woo us to himself. God could have given us something way more direct than the Lord's Prayer. Just a list of 110 things you ought to pray with to be a better Christian or something. But instead, he gives us something elegant and simple and small and short, and yet so comprehensive it engulfs all of life.

[00:28:17] **Don Payne:** I love that. Well, I hope you have made people want to read the book, Dan, because you've given a vivid and compelling and gripping and fresh approach to something that is, as you said, often so familiar that it's easily overlooked, easily bypassed, easily trivialized and yet is at the core of who we are before God and what it means to relate to our God in all the ways that he wants us to relate to him. And so, thanks for the work. Thanks for putting in the time and the thought to craft something that's going to be, and I hope already is proving so very fruitful and encouraging to people. Blessings on you for that.

[00:28:58] **DJ Marotta:** It's a great pleasure. And the last thing maybe I'll say about it is it's really easy to get excited about offering these kinds of things, because what we're really trying to offer people is a life of prayer with Christ. Yeah. And the book is just a servant of that. I sort of tell people, look, if you already have a rich prayer life with God, that includes the Lord's prayer, great news. You don't need to read the book. You could just skip it and just go straight to the good stuff. But if you haven't yet tasted some of that good stuff yet, then hopefully the book can be a servant of that.

[00:29:31] **Don Payne:** Well, I think it will. I really think it will. And I say that out of some personal experience because it's my privilege to teach a couple of sessions on the Lord's Prayer in the catechetical class for my church. So, I just recognize and appreciate so much of what you've said and how you've approached this. Friends, again, the name of the book is Liturgy in the Wilderness. DJ Marotta is the way your name's listed on the book. This is a Moody Press publication from 2022. Dan, it's so good to see you again and reconnect and hear more about your ministry and this particular work. Thanks for taking some time to be with us.

[00:30:10] **DJ Marotta:** Thanks, Don. It's an honor and a pleasure.

[00:30:12] **Don Payne:** Yeah. Friends, we're grateful that you've chosen to spend some time with us as well. And if you get the chance, please leave us a rating or a review wherever you listen to podcasts. And you can send any questions or comments directly to us at podcast@denverseminary.edu. In addition, visit our website, which is denverseminary.edu for more information and resources about Denver Seminary. That would include events, degree programs, and all the other episodes of this podcast Engage360, which include full transcripts. We're very grateful, for your interest, for your support, for your prayers. And until next time, may the Lord bless you. We'll talk to you again soon. Take care.