

Sermon for Sunday, March 17, 2019

OUR HEAVENLY FATHER

With good reason, Tertullian called the Lord's Prayer a compendium of the gospel. It contains "the whole of the Lord's discourse, the whole record of his instruction." In it, we rehearse those things which are characteristic of Jesus' teaching about God, about ourselves in relationship to God, and about the world in which we live and into which the kingdom of God is breaking. If we can fully understand it, and pay attention to it when we pray it, we will not only have a model for our own prayers, but will find ourselves in communion with the God whom Jesus knew so personally as to call, Abba!, Daddy! To pray our Lord's prayer from the depths of our hearts, is to enter into the very heart and mind and faith of Jesus himself.

Too often, of course, our recitation of the Lord's Prayer is just that, a repeating of some familiar liturgy in which we have little more investment than in the call to worship. That's why some churches have opted not to recite the Lord's Prayer every week in the hope that it will become more special by virtue of its infrequent use. I served in a church like that, and I decided it was a mistake. It's like saying to your beloved, "Sweetheart, in order that I may appreciate our conversations more, I'm only going to talk to you once a month." Distance may make the heart grow fonder, but it doesn't make a couple any closer. We want, we need to be close to God, and especially to the God we meet in and through Jesus Christ. If the Lord's Prayer has the capacity to enter us into communion with that God—and I think it does—then we can't say it frequently enough.

The Prayer is made up of three major parts. The first part is the address ("Our Father, who art in heaven"). The second part is three petitions which offer praise to God and attribute to God what is God's alone, namely everything ("Hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven"). The third part (the rest of the prayer) is three more petitions in which we ask God to provide us with the conditions that allow us to share actively in the kingdom's presence and proclamation ("Give us this day, our daily bread, and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors, and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil). I don't want us to get too caught up in these divisions however, because saying that the Lord's Prayer consists of three parts is kind of like saying that the Mona Lisa is made up of paint, canvass, and a frame. The Lord's Prayer has a beauty that is more than art, a beauty that cannot finally be appreciated in any explanation of it, but only in its praying. My hope is that this series of sermons will help us appreciate more fully the beauty that can be found in the praying of the Lord's Prayer. This morning I want to talk about the first part, the address: "Our Father, who art in heaven."

"Our Father." The very first word we speak in this prayer is not only terribly important, but instructive. The moment we begin to address God, we acknowledge that God is not "my" God, but "our" God, not "my" Father but "our" Father.

That plural possessive pronoun allows us to declare at the outset that we recognize ourselves as God's people, as members of a community of faith who turn to God and trust in God as the one who has drawn us into the church of his beloved son. We have become brothers and sisters in faith, with God as our loving and guiding parent. No longer do we live or pray in abject isolation. We live in the body and we pray in the body. Even if we pray alone, off in some secret place, when we say, "Our Father," we pray with the community of believers. So the Lord's Prayer begins by inviting us to realize that we are a part of the body

of believers who know God in the special way in which Jesus has made him known. We have a personal, though corporate, relationship with this God.

That plural possessive pronoun also serves as a corrective to privatized religion. We cannot know God fully if we stand outside of the community of faith. Because God is never simply "my" God, but is always "our" God. Therefore we test our perceptions of God with one another, searching through the common experience of the members of the church to know who God is.

One of the great tragedies of our day is when people outside the church choose to limit their perception of God and God's children to one Christian person or to one church, saying, "Well if that's what Christians are like, or if that's what the church is like, I don't want any part of it." They need to meet "our" God, the God of all the Christians and all the churches.

Finally that plural possessive pronoun reminds us that we, even though members of God's family, have no exclusive claim to God's grace. God is not only our heavenly parent, but also the creator and parent of all persons, of all those for whom Christ died, and for whom Christ continues to pray. When we pray the Lord's Prayer, saying "Our Father," we also pray on behalf of those who do not pray, in communion with them who are not yet incorporated into the body of Christ, but whose sin Christ bore in his body on the cross. When we say, "Our Father," we acknowledge that there is one God and Father of us all.

In the parable of the Prodigal Son, Jesus ties together what he has to say about God as father and us as God's children. This story tells us about the father's willingness to let his son go, about what the father has to go through, about the pain of separation, the joy of reconciliation, and about the abandon with which we experience acceptance in the household to which we always belong, even when we are off in a far country. The father loves us lavishly, whether we are at home enjoying the comfort and security of his company, or whether we have wandered off in search of selfish ends. We belong to him, no matter what.

Now calling on God as father does not necessarily mean that we believe in the "fatherhood" of God. We tread on dangerous ground if we try to suggest that God is limited by what we know as masculinity or femininity, and our understanding of fatherhood varies from person to person and family to family. What it means to call on God as father, is that we are free to call on the God whom Jesus knew as father. The word "father" speaks of the quality of God's relationship to us as a loving, caring, provident, correcting and nurturing person, who wills our freedom and wholeness.

Sometimes you hear clergy refer to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. This alternative language is used to speak of God in non-sexist terminology. Unfortunately, what gets lost in the translation, is the personal side of God's being. Even referring to God as our parent seems one step removed from the personal way in which Jesus knew God. He knew God in a most intimate and personal way, as Abba!, Daddy! By whatever terminology we use, it is the God he knew, whom we hope to know.

We ought not take for granted this ability Jesus gave us to call upon God in such an intimate and personal way. When Jesus lived, the name of God was considered so sacred that it could not be spoken. Jesus changed all that, by making us aware of how close God is to us, and how much God loves us. To lose that sense of God's immanence, and the sense of our intimacy with God would be really tragic. By calling God, our father, Jesus gave to us a sense of belonging. No matter how far we wander from home, we know that home still exists, and there is a God there, a most loving and forgiving one, who waits anxiously and eternally for our return.

"Who art in heaven," is the second half of the opening address. This phrase is not meant to remind us of where God is located, but points us to how much more God is than our earthly fathers. On the one hand, it points us to the extra of God as father which goes far beyond our experiences of earthly fatherhood. Our language is limited, and it is only natural for us to use the commonplace to point to the extraordinary. That's what Jesus does in his parables, and that extra has a way of reflecting back upon us in such a way that it begins to transform the ordinary. That is, the father-like love of God begins to give new shape and vision to what it means to be a loving, caring, and nurturing parent. But on the other hand, this phrase declares to us that God lives in that quality of relationships we call heavenly, in the domain of blessed communion to which Jesus gives us access as his followers. The very character of our God demands that he be in heaven, and the use of heaven in this address points us to the character of the God to whom we pray.

Heaven transcends this earth. The God who is in heaven is utterly other than us, utterly apart from us. God is the transcendent one: limitless, incomprehensible, free, sovereign, eternal, omnipotent, the king enthroned forever. God has no need of us, nor of our efforts. But out of the infinite love God has for us, God comes near to us in Christ, to become "our father," the one whom we can address as Abba!, Daddy! In Jesus Christ, we are invited to come near to God. The whole miracle of the incarnation, is contained in this address. Writes David Willis, "The warning on our medicine bottles does not apply to the God which Jesus makes known: "Keep out of the reach of children." God the transcendent one, takes a personal interest in what is happening in his world and among his people. We know him to be the heavenly Father because he does not remain high and lifted up, aloof and only unto himself. He accommodates himself, mixes it up with the world of his own making, and pays the price for the fidelity he wills from his covenant people.<sup>1</sup>

One final point is critical. The authority of this prayer Jesus taught us does not rest on its remarkable brevity, or on the novelty of its content, or on the depth of its theological insight. Its authority rests on the identity of the one who taught it to us. This is the Lord's Prayer, after all. We cannot say "Our Father, who art in heaven," without remembering him, who came to be God's messenger to us in the far country, and who now allows us to share in his prayer, thereby making our own prayers valid and fit for heaven.

In Jesus Christ, we hear the voice of God penetrating the dark shadows of our existence, calling us by name to see us safely to our heavenly home. And through Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray, we can answer the voice of our heavenly father as beloved children, reaching out to take God's hand with sighs of relief too deep for words, saying Abba!, Father! In him, and in him alone, we become personally aware that in God Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, the heart of a loving and adoring parent, is beating for us. Through Christ, we bring our hearts back to God's, even as we pray, "Our Father, who art in heaven."

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<sup>1</sup> David Willis, Daring Prayer, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1977), p. 60.