

Luke 11:1-2
June 8, 2008

South Plains
10th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Our Father Who Art In Heaven

We are beginning a summer series of sermons today on the Lord's Prayer by looking at the most controversial word in this prayer, "Father." I'll say a little about the controversy in a minute. But, we need to spend most of our time thinking about why this set prayer is important for Christians and how it may be helpful to anyone.

Obviously, it is one of the most familiar pieces of scripture and one of the most recognizable parts of worship. We say the words so often in church that their meaning becomes slippery from so much handling. The Scottish preacher Peter Marshall liked to move the Lord's Prayer around in the order of worship in the hope that a different context would give the words fresh meaning. It's worth noting that this is not a distinctly Christian prayer. Any good Jew in the first or twenty-first century could say these words. Could a Muslim? Or any pious monotheist? Perhaps.

Disciples of Jesus ask him to teach them to pray because they see Jesus often in prayer. That's especially true in Luke's Gospel where we find Jesus praying at his baptism (3:21), just before choosing the twelve (6:21), before prophesying his passion (9:18), during the transfiguration (9:28), and in Gethsemane (22:41). His

followers want the kind of relationship with God that Jesus enjoyed. It was customary for a rabbi to teach his disciples a prayer that might become the prayer of their own group. John the Baptist had done this, and now, so did Jesus. Perhaps these were the words Jesus himself most often used when addressing God. If that is the case, we are not only repeating an old Christian tradition, we are also imitating our Savior.

And, that brings us to one of the most distinctive characteristics of Jesus' ministry: his use of the word "Father" to address God. He may not have been the only Jew calling God "Father," but the emphasis he placed on that intimate relationship was unique. When we pray these words we enter into the same attitude of prayer practiced by Jesus. Calling God "Father" makes the rest of this prayer possible.

"Father" has two levels of meaning here. On the first and broadest level, it means Creator, Source of all that exists. Human beings are God's agents, created in the image of God to converse with God. When the Apostles Creed says "I believe in God the Father," it means "Creator of heaven and earth." In that sense all people are God's children. The Apostle Paul found common ground with the Greeks in Athens by reminding them that that one of their own writers acknowledged, "We too are his offspring (Acts 17:28)"

Jesus, of course, takes the words to the deeper level of an intimate relationship within the family. The

children of God in Christ claim Jesus as our brother. Paul tells us,

You have received a spirit of adoption.
When we cry, "Abba! Father! it is that very
Spirit bearing witness with our spirit
that we are children of God. (Rom 8:15-16)

"Abba" is the word that a child in Jesus' own culture would have used within the family to speak to her Daddy.

Some Christians are very comfortable calling themselves children of God, but they are not comfortable calling God "Father." That's where the controversy starts. It needs to be said that God is not a male father. God has no gender, neither male nor female. And, to worship a male god would be to follow the idolatrous example of the Canaanites and Philistines.

The additional problem is that some fathers are not loving and kind, but are so abusive that their children transfer the memory of a poor earthly father onto the Father of Christ. The Lord's Prayer wants to reverse that exchange. Jesus shows us a true picture of what fatherhood really is. He wants to heal the wounds caused by inadequate parenting and to provide for us all a better picture of fatherhood.

Every earthly father falls a little short in one way or another. I was blessed to have a wonderful father who took me fishing on the bank of Ivy Creek, taught me to love music and the sound of words, and showered me with love. But, he couldn't do everything. My best friend

growing up was my cousin. It was his Dad Harry who fathered me in the adventure of fishing with rod and reel. It was my uncle David who fathered me with his example of disciplined farm work. Others provided me with models, male and female, for the ordained ministry.

Jesus calls us his friends, and wants to take the part of our elder brother. He offers to share his Father with us. When we address God as "Father," we open the possibility of a new model of fatherhood, a complete way of parenting, a new way of becoming a child of God that transcends any other experience we have had of fathering. In fact, scripture transcends gender by telling us that God comforts us like a mother comforting her child (Isaiah 66:13), and remembers us the way a mother remembers her suckling baby (Isaiah 49:13).

Perhaps the best grace we receive by having permission to call God "Father" is the assurance that we have an approachable God. Elections and all the politicking that swamps the news today quickly become tiresome. Nevertheless, I like the primary season for one reason: it forces candidates to meet more people face to face and to listen to us. Very quickly, Barack Obama and John McCain will be assigned extra body guards. Their security detail will insure that conversations with ordinary Americans will become more and more rare until one of them disappears into the stratosphere of the presidency. But, for a little while longer, they will be approachable.

The God we worship is always approachable, if we will take the time to strike up a conversation. God's head is eternally cocked to one side, attentively listening to our needs, hopes, dreams, and fears.

I trust you have noticed by now that the quotation from Luke's Gospel is different from the version of the Lord's Prayer we say in worship from Matthew's Gospel. It's more than a different translation. Luke's prayer is bare bones. Like Matthew, however, there is no "me", "my" or "I" in this prayer; only "we" and "our."

By addressing God as "Our Father" in Matthew's version, the prayer requires that we enter corporate worship, even if we are praying alone. Christianity will not allow itself to be privatized or individualized without violence to the discipleship Jesus teaches. When we enter into our closet to pray, to use a biblical metaphor, we are still part of the communion of the saints. Our prayers ascend with the prayers of Christians all over the world. Our worship joins the heavenly hosts of angels and believers who surround the throne with their worship.

Using that language about heaven reminds us of the other clause left out of Luke's Gospel: "Our Father who art in heaven." I have an older friend who died recently. She always insisted on saying, "Our Father which art in heaven" because she believed we should not become chummy with the Sovereign Lord of the universe. The impersonal "which" reflects the Elizabethan reverence for royalty. Talk of heaven falls

into the same category of inadequate human speech that refers to God as masculine. "Who art in heaven" does balance out the intimacy of "Our Father." It reminds us of the paradox that the One who stooped to the manger of Bethlehem where Jesus became human is the same One who spoke worlds into existence, who is everlasting God. God is as close to us as the breath that fills our lungs and as far beyond us as the stars whose twinkling takes a thousand light years to reach our sky.

Praying this prayer is unlike any other communication. It moves us body and spirit closer to Jesus; and it can transform our speaking into the dynamic world of the Trinity. It is a prayer addressed to God the Father, taught by God the Son, and made possible by God the Holy Spirit.

Just a few verses after Jesus teaches this prayer, he tells a little parable to encourage us to keep seeking God.

"Who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

Whenever we pray, we are never using just our own words. We have the assistance of the Holy Spirit. Occasionally, we need to get out of the way and let the

Spirit speak. That's the value of praying after Jesus with the words of his prayer. And, so we pray together,

Our Father, who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done,
On earth, as it is in heaven.
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,
For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory
forever. Amen.