

The Lord's Prayer: Father
Sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA
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Matthew 6:9-13, Jeremiah 3:19, Psalm 89:26, Romans 8:14-17

Several months ago, I received some correspondence from a person who was deeply involved in the life of this congregation, but has since moved across the country. In her letter, this person - who is a woman of deep faith and prayer - wondered why I didn't spend more time in my preaching and in my newsletter articles addressing the topic of prayer. After all, she said, prayer is a vital component of the spiritual life. As a pastor I should be teaching and encouraging people to pray. I had to admit she had a point.

After praying over that challenge for a while, not long after that I decided that this summer I would preach a series of sermons on The Lord's Prayer. What better way into the task of teaching about prayer, I reasoned, than looking at how Jesus taught his first disciples to pray?

There are two versions of the Lord's Prayer in the Gospels. In one of them, Luke's version, Jesus lays out the model prayer after the disciples find him praying and they ask him, "Lord, teach us to pray." In Matthew's version, Jesus offers the prayer in the middle of his Sermon on the Mount. Having given his followers the Beatitudes and challenged them to go the extra mile ("You have heard it said, but I say to you"), Jesus turns to the practice of prayer. He tells his listeners to pray, not in order to be seen by others, but to be seen by God. Do not heap up empty phrases as some do, instead pray like this, he says. Listen now for God's word in Matthew 6:9-13. *Read Matthew here.*

Before we get into looking at the first part of Jesus' prayer, I want to read three more brief passages of scripture. The first two are single verses and represent just two examples of how even in the Old Testament God was referred to as father. Psalm 89:26, one of those examples, is part of a much longer prayer, and points back to God's anointing of King David. Listen now or what the Psalmist says David and his descendants should call God. The second passage is from the third chapter of Jeremiah, the 19th verse. God is speaking to the wayward nation of Judah through the voice of Jeremiah. Listen for what Jeremiah says.

The second passage is a portion of the Apostle Paul's letter to the church at Rome, his statement of faith in advance of his first visit there. I read this passage on Pentecost Sunday, when we welcomed our confirmands into the church by reaffirmation of faith, but it bears repeating as we look at the beginning of the Lord's Prayer. *Read Romans here.*

As I begin this sermon series on The Lord's Prayer, I think it is safe to say that most of us in this space have spoken its words hundreds upon hundreds of times. This prayer, in one form or another, was one of the first things most of us memorized as a child in church. I can't speak for the rest of you, but because it is so deeply ingrained in me and because I have prayed so many times, I confess that the prayer so often comes out of my mouth without me even thinking about what I am saying. And there is some benefit to that, I suppose.

During my intern year in seminary, I worked as a chaplain at a geriatric facility in Atlanta. While I was there I spent a good deal of time around patients and residents with Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia. One of the things I observed while visiting and leading worship with these elderly men and

women was that some of them, who by that point in the progress of their disease couldn't remember the names of their spouses, children, and grandchildren, could nonetheless say The Lord's Prayer verbatim. In my view, there is no small value in having such words, words that reflect our connection to God, so deeply etched in our souls.

However, because we can say the words of the prayer without thinking, we so often say them unthinkingly. So it is my hope that by the end of this series, we will all pay more attention to what we say when we pray that prayer Jesus taught us to pray. But more than that, I hope we will see and hear the Lord's Prayer not as the only way to pray, as if Jesus meant for generation after generation of his followers to recite precisely those words and only those words in precisely that and only that fashion. Instead, I hope we will begin to view them as a guide for how we might address God with the other prayers of our hearts, the prayers that well up from our souls when we can't sleep for worry in the middle of the night, or as we sit by the bedside of a sick or dying parent or spouse, or as we try to navigate the daily stresses and strains of life in the workplace, or at school, or in families.

The very first thing Jesus' model prayer teaches us about how to pray is what to call God. In Matthew's version, Jesus begins with "Our Father." In Luke's version, he leaves off the "Our." Before we talk about the significance of the word "our," a very important modifier indeed (and one we will talk about next week), a few thoughts about the word Father are in order.

Let me begin by saying that it is always a little tricky to deal with Father's Day (and Mother's Day, for that matter) in church. As appropriate as it is to give thanks to God for fathers and mothers in the context of worship, doing so can get complicated. Here is one reason why: not every father-child or mother-child relationship provokes thoughts of gratitude. Thank God, many of us, me included, can point to reasonably healthy relationships with our biological fathers. We can look upon and celebrate times when we felt loved, nurtured, and provided for. Where we can't, hopefully we have come to see that our flawed earthly fathers, working with their particular limitations, did the best they were capable of at the time. Or perhaps we can think of occasions when our father-child relationships experienced healing. Then, too, on Father's Day, we may think of people who have been like a father to us - a step-father, or a father-in-law, or a mentor.

But the truth of the matter is that the word *father* is heavily freighted for all of us. Some of us have very positive associations with the word. But for some it can evoke an emotionally distant figure who was never really around. For others, sadly, it can call forth the image of a verbally or physically abusive tyrant. Though some of us have very positive connections to the word, not everyone conjures up a positive image when they hear the word father.

This explains, I think, the time a few years ago when I had two very different conversations in the space of three days with two Immanuelites. I was having lunch with one of them, when she told me, "If we say the word Father one more time in worship, I am going to scream."

Well, I was schooled at a seminary which emphasized inclusive language, by professors who encouraged me to avoid using gender-specific wording for God, and I rarely if ever refer to God as he or Father in my prayers or sermons, so I thought her critique was a bit harsh. Of course, there are certain liturgical sung responses - such as the Gloria Patri and the Doxology - which refer to God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Many of our hymns speak of or address God as Father, and one of the benedictions I use frequently speaks of God our Father, and of course the Lord's Prayer uses the word Father, but apart from that I thought I was avoiding male language for God pretty well.

Two days later I was with another person who told me, “We don’t use the word Father nearly enough in our worship services. We should begin every prayer with Father.” If I ever labored under the illusion that I could please everybody all the time, it went out the window that day!

In both of those circumstances, I might well have said, “The word Father is more than a name, it is a metaphor. It was clearly an important metaphor to Jesus, at least as the gospel writers portray him. And Jesus wasn’t the first Jew to call God Father. There are a number of places in the Old Testament where God is referred to as Father. But the word Father was above all a way of describing a reality, God, which no one word can fully or adequately describe. There are lots of metaphors for God in the Bible: God is a rock, a fortress, a consuming fire, a shepherd, a shield, and a mother eagle, for instance. If you view Jesus as somehow divine, as I happen to, then there are even more - friend, bread of life, living water, and true vine, to name a few more. The word Father is just one metaphor, albeit a significant one, for trying to make sense of the reality of God.”

The important thing about metaphors is what they are trying to communicate. When it comes to God, metaphors are our way, as a colleague of mine put it, to “eff” what is ineffable. In the case of Jesus calling God Father, or as he does in other places Abba (which is Aramaic for Daddy), what the metaphor is trying to get across is *not* the gender of God. As if the God whom Moses encountered in the burning bush, the God who told Moses his name was ehyeh asher ehyeh, I am that I am or I will be what I will be, is some sort of big man with a white beard up in the sky. Words fail us, but what the metaphor is trying to get across to us is not the gender of God but the quality of the relationship God has with us.

That’s why I love the way William Young, the author of the best-selling book *The Shack*, conceives of the first person of the Trinity, the One Jesus calls Father. In *The Shack*, God the Father is portrayed as a big, African-American woman named, appropriately enough, Papa, who is ready and willing to wrap you in a hug. When the main character, Mack, who had a terrible relationship with his earthly father, asks Papa why she appeared to him in this way, she says something akin to, “This is the way you can best understand and receive who I am at this time.”¹

The gender through which we conceive God isn’t important because, after all, as Jesus says in the Gospel of John, “*God is Spirit, and those who worship God worship in Spirit and in truth.*” It is the quality of the relationship that matters.

Back to the Father image, whether you had a particularly good father or not, I think we all have an image in our minds of what an ideal father is like. An ideal father celebrates his children. An ideal father provides for and attempts to protect his children. And an ideal father challenges his children. To celebrate one’s son or daughter without challenging them to be the best they can be is tantamount to child neglect. But to challenge them without at the same time cherishing them is nothing short of child abuse.

The best image we get of the Father in scripture is in Luke’s Gospel, the 15th chapter. You remember the story of the Prodigal Son. There are two sons, the older dutiful one and the younger one who asks for his portion of the inheritance early, while the Father is still very much alive (which would have been a terrible affront to the Father, not to mention embarrassing the Father in the eyes of the village.) Then this younger son goes off to a distant land and squanders it all in loose living. The Father allows him to do this.

But what is most beautiful about the story is how the Father greets the son on his return. This is the part of the story that helps us see how we should understand the metaphor of the father. Because when the wayward son returns, the Father spots him on the horizon and rushes out to greet him, running, robes flapping in the wind, and then throws a feast for him. In that culture, a father never would have done that, never would have risked looking like a fool in front of the rest of the village in that way. But not this

Father. The picture Luke wants us to have of God as a Father is one who is willing to let us make our own mistakes, but who is ready and willing to welcome us when we turn back toward home. This Father rejoices over the return of the prodigal and invites the older son to join in the party. This is the picture of the Father the New Testament paints for us, and I think it should rightly shape our view of what an ideal father is.

Having said all of that, there are some things that even an ideal father cannot do. And this is why, for me, the image of Father (or if you like Parent) is a powerful one. After a certain point, a father cannot make his children's decisions for them. They have to decide for themselves. This is why they say that part of the job of a father or a mother is to give a child not just roots, but wings: the ability to make his or her own decisions. Not all of those decisions will be wise ones.

In my first congregation there was a woman who had two young adult sons, both of whom seemed to get into no shortage of trouble. It always seemed a little unfair that she didn't have one "good" son, one who acted more like the elder brother in the parable. But she didn't. I remember talking to her one day. She was heartbroken, grieving the poor decisions her sons were making, the paths they were charting for themselves at that point. I told her, "Linda, now you know at least a little of what God must feel like."

There is something else even an ideal father cannot do. An ideal father cannot prevent his children from facing sadness, tragedy, and death. Those things come to all human beings. Fathers and mothers might long to protect their children from having to face these things, but they come to all of us, and part of the reason they do is because God has given us freedom. We are not puppets or automatons placed in a perfect world where bad things never happen. This is not Eden. We live in a world of great beauty and wonder, but also a world of disease and natural disaster, a world where human beings can practice great compassion and tremendous kindness but also wreak terrible destruction and unspeakable evil.

God doesn't keep us from facing sadness, tragedy, and death, but God does walk with us through them, as God walks with us through the rest of life. Do you know how I know that? Because I am a pastor.

This week, I had the privilege of holding a tiny day-old baby. I had the privilege of being in a hospital room and praying with a couple before one of them faced cancer surgery. I had the privilege, yesterday afternoon, of marrying a lovely young couple. And yesterday morning, I had the privilege of being at the bedside of one of our members, Art Close, right after he died.

If I could prevent people from dying, believe me, I would. But I can't. And neither, it seems, does God keep people from dying. God has placed in a world where death is an inevitability for all of us sooner or later. But God, like a good father, is present with us in those times, and God does not let death have the last word.

In Jesus' name.

Amen.

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¹ William Young, *The Shack*, (Newbury Park, CA: Windblown Media, 2007).