

Our Father in Heaven

Sermon preached by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt

Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA

June 27, 2010

Psalm 8, Matthew 6:9-13

Today I continue my sermon series on the Lord's Prayer, and what it teaches us about how to pray, by looking at how Jesus, in Matthew's version of Jesus' model prayer, bookends the word Father with the words "our" and "in heaven." In Luke's Gospel, Jesus begins his prayer by simply addressing God as Father. As I said last week, the word father is more than a name, it is a metaphor. It is a metaphor pointing not to the gender of God, but the quality of God's relationship with us. Whether we had an ideal father or not, and no earthly father is perfect, we can all conceive of what an ideal father is like. And our best window into how to understand God as an ideal Father can be seen in Luke's parable of the Prodigal Son.

In Matthew's version of the prayer (the one we pray), Jesus tells the disciples to address God like this: "*Our Father in Heaven.*" These qualifiers are important.

Before I read the text of the Lord's Prayer from Matthew, I invite you to listen with me to the words of a prayer that predates Jesus' teaching by at least six hundred years and, if the tradition that King David wrote it is true, as many as a thousand years. Psalm 8 is sung in praise of God's work of creation. It does not mention God as a father (there are other psalms, 89 and 68 for example, which do), but it does use the word "our", and it refers to God as above the heavens. Listen now for God's word in Psalm 8 *Read Psalm 8 here.*

As you hear Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer again, think about why Matthew might depict Jesus teaching the disciples to say *Our Father in Heaven*. What might he be attempting to communicate by using the word "our" in reference to God? And why would Jesus, who came to show the disciples that God was not simply beyond them, but somehow beside them and within them, refer to the Father being "in heaven?" *Read Matthew 6:9-13 here.*

One of the things one learns in trying to unpack the Lord's Prayer is how highly charged with meaning each of the words in the prayer can be. We saw that last week in looking at the word Father. All of us had a biological father, and all of us have had experiences with earthly fathers of some sort or another, so the word father comes freighted with meaning for all of us - and not all of our associations with the word may be positive.

As I reflect on the words that bookend the word Father in the prayer, it strikes me that they are no less tricky to unpack. Let's begin with the word "Our." What does it convey?

Well, first and foremost, using the adjective "our" suggests some **investment in** or **connection to** the term it modifies. So, if I asked you, "How did our soccer team do yesterday in the World Cup elimination round?" I imagine almost all of you, even those with little interest in soccer, would be able to tell me that the United States lost to Ghana 2-1. The hype around the team making it into the elimination rounds has been so great that I think almost all of us living here in the U.S. feel some connection to them. Even those of you who are not U.S. citizens would know what I meant by our. Your team might be England, it might be Scotland, or some other country, but you would know what I, as an American citizen, meant when I said "our team."

Using the word *our* suggests some meaningful connection to the term it modifies. So it always pleases me to hear how people's language begins to change as they move from visiting this congregation to really becoming involved in the work and worship of Immanuel. People who have told you or me, "I really like your church. I am impressed by what your church is doing in the world. I like worshiping in your church," gradually begin to say, "I am so glad to be a part of *our* church." To move from saying, "Your church" to "our church" is to begin to feel some investment in this community of faith.

When Jesus tells his followers to address God as Our Father, he is teaching them to claim that they are connected to, invested in, God. To call God, "Our Father" is to claim that we are connected in some way to the God to whom we pray. It is to acknowledge an investment in that relationship. And I think it is also in some way to indicate that we are not embarrassed, nor should we be, by that connection.

I understand some of the reasons why, but it saddens me how easy it is for mainline church members to downplay their connection to the God we have come to know in Jesus Christ and how important that relationship is to them. We, who often have no trouble wearing the colors and logos of our colleges or our favorite sports teams - and how embarrassing can it be some years to be a Redskins or a Nats fan, not to mention a Cubs fan? - somehow get very shy when it comes to acknowledging our faith and what a difference it makes to us.

One of the reasons why we downplay our connection to God may center in the way some people hear the word "our." A friend of mine told me about being in the car with some good friends of hers. They passed a church with a sign out front that had the words, "Our God is an awesome God" on it. Well, this rubbed her friend the wrong way. What she saw in the sign was an attempt to possess God, to say there is more than one god, and we have the right one, and our God is better than your god.

To use the word "Our" in reference to God does not have to be exclusive, as if we are saying, "God is our God and, therefore, not yours. Nah, nah, nah."

I heard a story this week of two girls who were living overseas with their mom and the three of them came back to the States for a visit with their grandmother. Naturally, they called their grandmother Grandma. Their young cousin, who lived much closer to his grandmother and wasn't used to sharing her affection, told his aunt (the girls' mother), "Tell them to stop calling Grandma, Grandma. She is not their grandma. She is my grandma." The wise aunt said to her nephew, "Oh, but she is their grandmother, too, because she is my mother just like she is your dad's mother."

People of various religious faiths can sometimes be like that little boy, saying, "Tell them to stop calling God their God. God is our God, not theirs. We have a corner on the God market. God belongs to us." I saw a wonderful cartoon about that not long ago. A person had just joined a religious community, and the single frame cartoon showed them being handed a box. "Welcome to the faith. Now here is your complimentary box, outside of which you should never think again." This is not really our problem at Immanuel, of course.

But whenever we think we've got God in a box, or that we can control God, we've missed the mark. As we mature in faith, we realize that faith is not about us possessing God and telling God what to do, it is about God working through us. There's a wonderful example of that progression in the Old Testament book, The Song of Solomon. You know that the Song is a love poem between two earthly lovers. It is an earthy, erotic poem about the love between a man and a woman, and that is what it was originally intended to be. But very early in the history of its interpretation it began to be read allegorically as a love poem between God and Israel, or, in Christian hands, God and the church.

Near the beginning of the poem, the woman, who represents the human in relationship with God, says, “My beloved is mine and I am his.” Do you hear the overtone of possession in that? God belongs to me, and, oh, by the way, I belong to God. Later in the poem, the woman says, “I am my beloved’s and he is mine.” The order is swapped. It is a move in the right direction. What is most important is that I belong to God. Then finally, near the end of the poem, the woman says, “I am my beloved’s and his desire is for me.” No longer is there any sense that the beloved, God, can be possessed. Do you see? In the process of growing in faith, we begin to realize that what is important **is** that we belong to God, not that God somehow belongs to us.

So to use the word “our” in reference to God can be **expansive rather than exclusive**. What if, when we pray the Lord’s Prayer, or we address God with the other prayers of our hearts, we hear the word “Our” connecting us not just to God but to all other Christians, and not just all other Christians, but all humanity, and not just all humanity but the whole created order? What if using the word Our is not a way to limit God, or box God in, but to show God’s connection with all creation?

This leads to the next big reason why we are called to address God as **our** Father. It **moves us beyond our individual concerns** (which are not unimportant of course) and our individual sense of connection with God (which also has its place) to a sense of connection with others. This is why I like the hokey little poem I first heard years ago:

*You cannot pray the Lord's Prayer and even once say "I"
 You cannot pray the Lord's Prayer and even once say "My"
 When you pray the Lord's Prayer, you pray for one another.
 And when you ask for daily bread, you must include your brother.
 For others are included in each and every plea.
 From beginning to end, it does not once say, "Me."*

This does not mean that it is wrong to pray for personal concerns, or to pray calling God my Father or my Lord (although it is interesting to take a tour through Paul’s letters and see that only very infrequently did he ever speak of Jesus as my Lord. He almost always spoke using the word Our - our Lord or Our God). It is simply to recognize that whenever we pray, we are not alone in that task. We are connected to people throughout time and space - the people we worship with, the people who worship elsewhere around the world, the people who don’t worship at all, the people who preceded us in faith and are now living in eternity, and the people yet to come who will inherit our faith.

This is part of the reason I really enjoy All Saints’ Sunday in November. As we come to the communion table that day, I intentionally think about my connection to those of who have gone before me, who have also prayed Our Father and in some real way continue to share in the feast with us. And when we come to the table on World Communion Sunday, I intentionally think of my connection to people around the globe, and indeed to the whole creation, knowing that God is God of us all.

It is worth hearing again what Will Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas said about this connection with others in the words printed on the front of your bulletin. “There may be religions that come to you through quiet walks in the woods, or by sitting quietly in the library with a book, or rummaging around in the recesses of your psyche. Christianity is not one of them. Christianity is inherently communal, a matter of life in the Body, the church. Jesus did not call isolated individuals to follow him. He called a group of disciples. He gathered a crowd.”²

We need each other. To pray Our Father is to acknowledge that we are in this together. This is why communal worship is so important. It has a way of connecting us to one another. Which brings me to a challenge I want to lay before all of us.

Many of you know that we are coming up on our 50th anniversary year as a congregation. Fifty years ago, September of 1960, a band of believers started meeting for worship at Franklin Sherman School, and that next October, 1961, they and some people who came along in that first year were chartered as Immanuel Presbyterian Church. So starting in September, we will be doing a number of things to commemorate our anniversary year.

One of the things I would like to do, to mark our 50th anniversary year, is to challenge every member and friend of Immanuel to commit to being in some sort of communal worship experience at least fifty times during that year. Not all of them will be on Sunday mornings, there may be special services at other times or study gatherings during the week. Not all of them will necessarily be at Immanuel. I'm not asking you to do that for self-serving reasons, although I have no doubt it will increase our worship attendance. I'm encouraging you to do that because I believe worshipping together in community is good for our souls. *We need each other.*

So let me quickly turn to the other bookend to the word Father - our Father *in heaven*.

The ancient Hebrews likely viewed heaven as a geographical place, somewhere above the sky, where God lived. At least you might get that idea from reading Psalm 8. And that's certainly one way to view heaven. But I think when the prayer says, "Our Father in heaven," it is talking not so much about a geographical place as a reality, a reality that is somehow beyond us, a reality toward which we can strive, a reality that we can experience.. So when we talk of God being in heaven, we are saying that God is not only within us and beside us, God is also in some way beyond us, challenging us and holding us accountable to a vision larger than ourselves.

Frederick Buechner, in some of his writing on the Lord's Prayer, speaks of how bold it is to truly pray and mean its words. To pray thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven is bold. And the second half of the prayer is no less bold, as we ask God to give us, forgive us, don't test us and deliver us. It takes guts, Buechner says, to face the omnipotence that is God's and guts to face the impotence that is so often ours.

"It is only the words 'Our Father' that make the prayer bearable," Buechner writes, "*If God is indeed something like a father, then maybe as something like children we can risk approaching him anyway.*"³

And so we do. And so we do.

In Jesus' name.

Amen.

Aaron D. Fulp-Eickstaedt

¹ Anonymous, quoted various places, including here <http://www.crossmarks.com/lordpray/lp3.htm>

² William Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas, *Lord, Teach Us: The Lord's Prayer and the Christian Life* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), p. 28.

³ Frederick Buechner, *Beyond Words: Daily Readings in the ABC's of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2004), p. 226.