

"Our Father"  
Matthew 6:5-14  
Rev. David K. Wood, Ph.D.  
Deer Creek United Presbyterian Church/Pleasant Unity United Presbyterian Church  
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On the cold winter morning of February 4, 1974--forty-nine years ago yesterday--I boarded a jet in Newark, New Jersey bound for the sunny climes of San Francisco, California. I was excited beyond belief as I had never been ANYWHERE west of Philadelphia and it was my very first jet plane ride EVER. After six hours in the air, the plane at last landed and I stepped out onto what would become my home for the next twelve years and arguably the most important period of my life. One lasting memory I have of that day was seeing the headline "Patty Hearst Kidnapped" displayed in huge letters across the front page of the San Francisco Examiner, the city's evening newspaper- Patty Hearst being the daughter of the Examiner's owner and publisher. For the next three months, that event dominated the Bay area's news almost 24/7.

Waiting there to pick me up was my Uncle Ron, an Assembly of God minister who was prepared to drive me sixty miles south to my new school. You see, I had just concluded my sophomore year at a large, secular, liberal university to begin attending a small conservative Bible college in the Santa Cruz mountains to pursue my goal of becoming a minister. I had no idea what awaited me some three thousand miles away but along with my small suitcase, I was armed with the certain conviction that Jesus was always at my side and his Church--the Body of Christ--would be there to welcome and nurture me every step along the way. Whether you want to call it faith or even naiveté, I possessed a brimming confidence that I could go anywhere in this world and never feel alone or afraid.

Very early the next morning, on what would be my first full day in paradise, I arose from my dormitory bed to take a nice, leisurely walk down the long drive that connected the campus to the main road. It was one of the most beautiful sights I had ever seen with meandering streams, wild ferns, and enormous redwood trees--many of which were five hundred years or older--lining both sides of the thoroughfare. As I walked amidst such natural splendor, I felt inspired enough to offer up some much-deserved praise to God, the Grand Architect of it all. Pausing for a moment, I raised my hands over my head and began to pray something like: "Oh great and glorious God; O Thou magnificent Creator by whose hands these wonders were wrought and by whose power these are sustained." But almost immediately, I had to stop sensing something wasn't right. Employing the same grandiose King James language, I tried to restart my prayer: "O wondrous Lord, who inhabitest the praises of Thy people," but again, before I could even complete the opening sentence, I had to shut her down. Now I KNEW something was wrong. I was speaking all right but it didn't feel like I had a listener on the other end.

At that, it began to dawn on me how foolish my aborted prayer had sounded, talking to God as though God was some feudal potentate with words that held very little meaning to me. Feeling somewhat foolish, I lowered my hands and muttered, "What am I doing? Father in heaven, forgive me for being so stupid" and AT ONCE I INSTINCTIVELY KNEW that God

had heard THAT! You see, God wasn't at all impressed by my flowery introduction- God just wanted me to address him by his REAL name, the one he loves to hear above all others, "Father." The lesson I had learned on my first day in California was one NO CLASSROOM could ever teach- that when we humbly approach God and address him simply as an intimate friend, God will always take time out to hear the REST of what it is we have to say. As we saw in last week's sermon in my illustration of Lionel Logue's simple word of instruction to a stuttering King George VI as he was about to make the most important speech of his life, that Britain had just declared war on Nazi Germany, the success in every public speech is the same as in every successful PRAYER, "Forget all else and speak as though to a friend." But if we attempt to address God with a lot of meaningless and insincere jargon designed to impress OURSELVES, then we might as well pray to a ROCK for all the good it will do us.

To people in every culture and in every age, prayer has always been central to their spiritual habits and religious customs, although not all of it always profitable. The Pharisees would spend hours on street corners, parading their piety with long, laborious prayers- but God did not hear them. The Ephesians would stand before the Temple of Diana crying out in mindless repetition, "Great is Diana of the Ephesians!" until they almost dropped from exhaustion- but God did not hear THEIR prayers either. The Buddhists of Tibet turn their prayer wheels all day long- and God doesn't take notice. But a gangly kid from the suburbs of N.J. drops his hands in disgust and confesses, "Oh Father, how can I be so stupid" and it INSTANTLY captures the heart and attention of the Lord of Lord and King of Kings! So simple, so brief, and yet it works! This morning, we look at the opening words of ANOTHER brief and simple prayer- one it turns out is MUCH MORE than a prayer but a concise summary of the preaching, teaching and faith of Jesus Christ himself.

For most of us, "The Lord's Prayer" was probably the first prayer we learned by heart as children, and though a person might forget everything else about his or her faith, those words will stick with him or her forever. Congregations the world over, including our own, incorporate those seven short petitions of sixty-six words into their worship, a prayer that has bound Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox, liberals and conservatives alike. George Buttrick, the famous Presbyterian preacher, had this to say about it:

*The Lord's Prayer is as childlike as it is brief- childlike, not childish: "Our Father." It does not parade human knowledge, but rather admits an ignorance. It does not pretend to human power, but confesses helplessness: "Deliver us from evil." It pleads no merit, but is acutely aware of human failure and casts itself on Divine grace: "Forgive us our debts." It surrenders all human will to God's will: "Thy will, thy kingdom, thy name." Yet it has awestruck wonder and a glad trust in life's tomorrows: "Thy kingdom come...in earth, as it is in heaven." A brief prayer- said slowly, it takes only about thirty seconds. A childlike prayer- it sticks in the throat of a proud man. Understood in the full light of Christ it might be the creed on which all Christians could unite. (So We Believe, So We Pray, p.124)*

When Jesus utters this prayer, it is meant to be instructive to his disciples. However, when he told them, "Pray, then, in this way," he wasn't instructing them to repeat it word for word and line after line as WE so mechanically and thoughtlessly do in our worship services.

Rather, they were to pray in "LIKE MANNER." He was instructing them to pray about the most critical points of their faith- about the Fatherhood of God, his holiness, his kingdom, his will. He was encouraging them to look to God for their daily provisions, to seek forgiveness from God when he or a brother has been offended, to trust God for protection against temptation and our enemies. When we DO so, then mere formality ends and REAL prayer begins!

The Lord's Prayer opens with the two most important words in it- "Our Father." They tell us who we are to look to in prayer and how we are to regard him. By beginning with the word "our," the entire meaning of the prayer is changed. No longer is it something we do BY ourselves FOR ourselves, but rather, we pray both WITH the world and ON behalf of the world- for ALL PERSONS EVERYWHERE. When we pray "OUR Father," we claim that not only is God "Father" over Presbyterians and Baptists, Methodists and Roman Catholics, but Mormons and Muslims and Christian Scientists, Buddhists and Hindus, and even those who don't profess or believe in God- God is Father OVER THESE, AS WELL.

Back in the mid-1980's while ministering at a church about a hundred miles north of here, I took my youth group to Michigan's Upper Peninsula for a week. On the trip was a young foreign exchange student from Japan who had been raised a Buddhist. The idea of God seemed completely foreign to her as Buddhism has no god in it per se. She would ask me many questions about the Christian faith and who this God WAS whom we spoke about and prayed to and worshiped on Sunday mornings. I discovered just how difficult it was to communicate to someone without any NOTION of God much less WHO this God is. After much thought and some prayer, the most elemental concept I could come up with was that our God was also "our Father," a person who loved HER equally as much as any of us. I also told her that Jesus was God's Son and, thus, HER elder brother and THAT she could understand. Though the abstract concept of God as "spirit" made no sense to her, God as "Father" DID as she could identify with her OWN loving, caring father back in Japan.

The idea that God is a Father who loves and cares for us far more than our earthly parents ever could is not just the beginning of our PRAYER- it is also the beginning of our knowledge of GOD. The "our" in "Our Father" reminds us that this not meant to be an individualized prayer, that is, a prayer focused only on our own selves and our own selfish wants and interests. Rather, it reminds us that we are all part of a global family and that our concerns must no less be about the larger world around us. Because we pray "OUR Father," we are then to pray for OUR family and friends- in THEIR joys and in THEIR sorrows, in THEIR sickness and in THEIR health. We no less ought to pray for OUR church as it ministers to its members and to the needs in OUR community. Because we pray "Our Father," we pray for the poor who struggle to make ends meet, for the homeless who live under bridges or in cardboard boxes, for persons stricken with VARIOUS cancers as well as those whose minds are ravaged by Alzheimer's or their bodies by Parkinson's. We pray for our leaders, that they may be filled with all wisdom as they make important decisions that affect us all and we are to no less pray for the whole family of nations whether friend OR foe- pray that tensions may cease and that we might begin to work towards our mutual interests rather than our own selfish ends. The Lord's Prayer reminds us that God's love and provisions don't just extend to his people, the church, but to the ENTIRE WORLD, including the many victims and casualties in wars or in natural

disasters. As God's concerns remain world-wide, so must our OWN be enlarged to embrace the whole wide world, for by extension where there is fatherhood, there must be sisterhood and brotherhood AS WELL.

The address of God as "Father" in the SECOND word of our prayer is one of the most radical concepts introduced by Jesus. To the Jews, God was a stern Judge who sat in a high and holy place; only with fear and foreboding did anyone dare to address such a powerful figure. Just seven times is God ever referred to as Father in the Old Testament, and then, not over the individual person, but over all of Israel. In turn, Israel was called God's "son."

Jesus, on the other hand, refers to God as "Father" OVER SEVENTY TIMES and it becomes his favorite form of personal address. Where the Jew believed that relationship was reserved only for himself, that it was only the exclusive right of the Israelite, Jesus expands it to embrace God's love for EVERY human being. He surrounded himself with criminals and prostitutes and tax-collectors- to the shock of the Pharisees who believed that they ALONE were the righteous ones. For Christ, "our Father" was THEIR Father as well- a Father to the poor, a Father to the hungry, a Father to the sick, a Father to the outcast, a Father to Gentiles AND the sinners alike. By praying "Our Father," he destroyed their arrogant claims and allowed ALL people to come to God and ask for his mercy and help.

God thus becomes the Father to the father-less, EVERYWHERE. Regardless of one's social status or economic standing, despite their deep political or philosophical differences, in spite of any differences in race or skin color, in religion or sexual preference, God says to us, "THIS is your new family. LOVE them! PRAY for them! CARE for them!" To call God "Father" is thus to look upon friends and neighbors, strangers and EVEN OUR ENEMIES as "our brother" and "our sister," for this is how God continued to regard US, even while we were yet HIS enemies. Thus The "Fatherhood" of God makes this world small and binds us together as ONE. If Christians are ever going to have their hearts enlarged and their commitments expanded, then as we sing in "Jesus Loves the Little Children," it must begin with a profound awareness that "red and yellow, black and white," we're ALL God's children in his sight.

However, what our Lord meant by it was not that God was LITERALLY a father, that is, in the same sense that you or I might be a father to our children. Rather, Jesus was trying to show us that God RELATES TO US in the SAME CARING AND COMPASSIONATE WAY that a father loves his own son or daughter. Christ's use of "Father" in reference to God was a way of getting at and understanding the QUALITY of God's relationship to us- not to define in any way the person of God's own self. This bears repeating: God is not literally a parent of any kind but transcends any of the images or metaphors we may use to understand him.

But then AGAIN, there are many who can't connect God with the image of a "Father," especially women whose only image of a father is of one who beat or abused them when they were children, or who refused to allow them to have any advantages the boys in their family were allowed. Though God as "Father" may be the PRIMARY one, it is by no means the ONLY one. I believe one could also use a feminine pronoun like "she" and call God "Mother" and STILL maintain that same kind of intimacy. The fact is that God possesses and exercises both "paternal" AND "maternal" qualities in his relationship to creation. Still, we need to

remember that WHATEVER images we use, God TRANSCENDS such symbols. The Bible tells us that God is eternal, invisible, a spirit without form. In the Old Testament, we read that God intentionally gave his people--the Jews--no visual representation of himself, even refusing to give them his "name." Therefore, we need to keep in mind that the Bible employs MANY images to help communicate the many aspects of God's own being but they all remain provisional, they all remain limited.

Around twenty-five years ago, I received an urgent call from one of my closest friends- a Vietnamese man named Nam. He and I had attended seminary together in California in the early 80's and a decade later, found ourselves in the same doctoral program in New Jersey, on the other side of the country. His father, the first and only Vietnamese pastor in our Presbyterian denomination, had suddenly died earlier that morning in California and Nam needed a ride to the airport for the long flight home. As we drove to Newark Airport, he shared with me the shock of losing his closest friend, the one who had made the greatest influence in his life.

I could identify with him for in the early morning hours many years before, while I was still a college student in California, I TOO had received a SIMILAR phone call informing me that MY father had just died back in New Jersey. I TOO had a friend drive me to the airport for the long journey home. Like Nam, my father was also MY best friend and the greatest influence in MY life. I knew that the days and weeks would be ESPECIALLY hard for him and his family- the loss of someone like that never quite goes away. I told him that there wasn't a day that I didn't think of my dad--of his kindness, his warmth, and especially his marvelous sense of humor--and were the day ever to come when I found MYSELF a father, I pray I would be able to emulate his example in my OWN life.

But then I shared with him what I found sustaining in those terrible hours, what had comforted ME throughout those many years. For good or for ill, as our fathers had their lives guided and influenced by THEIR fathers as did their fathers BEFORE THEM, there was yet another, much GREATER parental figure in their lives and in OURS- one infinitely more loving and patient and wiser than THEY could ever be: our Heavenly Father, the father of our Lord Jesus Christ. THIS father was no stern, authoritative figure, but One who looks after each individual with boundless compassion and concern. He hears our faintest cries and understands our bitterest complaints; he knows our limitations and is sympathetic to our earthly struggles.

The bottom line is this, that by revealing the "Fatherhood" of God, Jesus has taught us the SECURITY that comes with sonship. It reassures our hearts and sets our minds at ease; it frees us from our guilt and despair, and fills us with his joy and peace. And even though he knows the worst of us, and though we may slip and fall many times before we go home to be with him, like the father of the Prodigal, our God is a "WAITING Father" whose love shall never leave us or diminish. Hence, to pray "Our Father" is ALL THE INTRODUCTION you and I will ever need. Let us pray...

*Heavenly Father, as your children, we place our worries, our cares, our troubles; into your wisdom, we place our path, our direction, and our goal; into your love, we place our very lives. In Christ's name we pray, amen.*