

June 16, 2013

“The Lord’s Prayer: Our Father, who art in Heaven...”

Scripture: Isaiah 29:22-24; 1 John 3:1-3; Matthew 6:9

Last week, we talked about what prayer is and I said prayer was the beginning of a relationship with God which, through regular practice, opens our awareness of the presence of God in our lives and leads us into a more intentional way of living and thinking. This week, we begin with a really big question: To whom do we pray? The obvious answer is God, who we understand in the Reformed, Puritan, Congregational tradition to be One Being in Three Persons - God the Father, Jesus Christ the Son and the Holy Spirit. So this is to whom we are praying. But as soon as we say that we are into “Why?” questions. Why is God a Father? Why refer to God as a Father or a Mother at all? Why?

In our readings from the Old Testament in Isaiah, and from John’s Letter in the New Testament, we begin to see an answer to the question, “*Why is God a Father?*” Because we are God’s children. Now, referring to God as “Father” is not a negation of God as “Mother” - remember last summer, I spent the entire summer referring to the Holy Spirit, the third person of the being of God, as “her” and “she”. So before we go any further, since it is 2013 and important, good and holy developments have occurred in our progressive understandings of male and female designations in our language, let’s qualify and clarify some things.

First, we need to recognize that any designation of God in human terms is precisely that - us placing human qualities on God. God as father is what is called an ‘*anthropomorphisation*’, a placing of human qualities upon something that is not human. We do this all the time with our pets, and if you have dogs, they simply take it. Cats just walk away. It is not wrong to anthropomorphise God or animals; we just need to recognize the limitations.

Second, and most important for our discussion about prayer, is that when we refer to God as Father, we are referring not to gender - male or female - but instead to a *role*. This is a valuable distinction. If we are truly honest, we cannot relate to a “Trinity”. What is a Trinity? How do I have a relationship with it/them? It is abstract and an idea. We become enthralled with ideas but we do not have relationships, friendships, with abstractions and ideas. Children do not have close and personal relationships with abstractions and ideas. We do have relationships with people and individuals, however. So when God is in the role of Father, we can relate to God in the kind of deep and personal relationship Jesus had with God and God wishes to have with us.

So we are dealing with roles, with aspects of God’s being which give us ways to be in relationship with God and Jesus. In the Lord’s Prayer, God is no longer an abstract entity set far away. Instead, God is a Father, “Our Father”, who is very close to us. Psalm 148 says, “*The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. He fulfills the desire of all who fear him; he also hears their cry, and saves them*” (148:18-19). So when we say, “*Our Father, who art in heaven...*” we are not speaking of a God who is far away from us. “Heaven” here simply means “*Where you are not...*” Or it means God is coming from where you are not in order to bring you into a very close relationship, a Father-like relationship where God is.

In saying this, however, I am immediately aware of something that is very difficult to talk about on a day like today, Father’s Day. For many of you, you have good memories of your relationship with your earthly father and that is a blessing. For some of you, past difficulties have been resolved and redeemed by maturity and a willingness to continually try and try again to achieve a better, more meaningful relationship with your earthly father.

and that is a testament to both of you and also a great blessing. But for many of you, that relationship has been broken. For some of you, the role of father has been irretrievably damaged by abuse, absence and adversity. This is a tragedy and it is far more common than it should be.

I say it is a tragedy because we need role models in our world. We need good role models for mothers and we need good role models for fathers. Did you know that in America today 1 out of 3 children grow up in a home without a father? Now, I am not going to descend into culture wars about what a family should look like. What a family is has changed throughout history and is changing now. We can avoid those discussions though because, when we speak of roles, they can be filled by male or female, mother or father, friend or mentor. But they are roles which have to be chosen actively and with great intention. These are roles that we are called by nature and by choice to step into. We either back into these roles by natural event or by choice. I believe the role is strengthened and empowered by making the choice to enter into the role. So, when we speak of God in the role of Father, and when those of us who are fathers need good role models, we must choose our examples of those roles wisely.

So for those 15 million children with no father in the house, where will they find a role model for a father? Well, I don't watch network television anymore, but that is where most people find their role models these days. And if you watch the sitcoms or the dramas, the choice of good father role models is pretty slim. If you are into crime dramas, most of the fathers are portrayed as superheroes, criminals or abusive. If you are into sitcoms, most of the fathers are passive, pressed down by power systems at work and incredibly unhealthy.

When Jesus refers to God as "*Father*", as "*Our Father*", he is doing two things. He is holding God up - "*hallowing*" if you will - as the primary example of what a Father is and he is showing the disciples what it means to be in relationship with such a Father. Jesus is the earthly experience of God in the flesh, the one who becomes human so we might be truly human ourselves. How does John put it? "*What we do know is this: when God is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.*" To put this another way, the more like Christ we act, the more like God we become. The role models we choose influence and affect the kind of person we will be. If we are following Jesus, we are seeking to become more like Jesus, which does not mean becoming an automaton or a carbon copy of one another. Instead, becoming like Jesus means becoming like God the Father, who wants his children to remember who they truly are, which is a vast, sparkling array of different, individual, singular stars in a galaxy stretching as far as the eye can see, just as it did for Abraham all those centuries ago when the promise was made by God with Abraham in the desert of Ur, stars shining brightly with the love of God and the presence of Christ.

Who then will be our role model for our earthly fathering? Just so we are clear, this question is not age specific, nor is it dependent upon whether you actually have children, and nor is it required that you do something about a completely broken relationship. It does mean, though, reclaiming true fatherhood for yourself and perhaps for a relationship that cannot be repaired.

If we are looking for good father role models, we need look no further than Jesus Christ. To choose Jesus as a role model for what God the Father and what fathering can be like for us means something much more positive and meaningful than anything we will find on the 'glowing oculus' as my mother used to call television.

Raising a child and being a good father can be difficult work, as many of you know. When Kate and I knew she was pregnant with Rhiannon we made a pact that whatever issues we personally had and whatever baggage we were carrying from our pasts would be set aside to the best of our abilities so that whoever this child

was to become would be allowed to have that possibility. It was a brave promise and somewhat naive as we were bathed in the excitement of pregnancy hormones and future possibilities. I say naive because I have learned something very important, I think, in my experience of being a father. It is an awareness which I have been made aware of mostly since I was ordained 5 years ago today. What I have learned is that, if I really believe what I say up here, the most important job of a father is to allow a child to be the person they truly are. The more we can allow this, whether it is a child or a friend or a congregation, the closer we get to what John is talking about when he says we are all becoming more like Christ.

People are who they are, and then there is the person God intends us to be. The goal, if we can speak of goals with regard to such things, is for who we are and who God intends us to be become the same thing. How will we guide one another, how will we father one another into the Jesus-like person God is drawing us toward?

Well, I am still learning the answer to that question. For today, at least, I think about how Jesus does this. He tells us a little bit in John 10, where he speaks of himself as the Good Shepherd. Jesus says of himself, "*The people hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.*" We, the sheep who follow Christ, are named and called out as individuals, and we are led out to a place of community, service and love. This sounds an awful lot like what it might be to be fathered well.

Jesus the Good Shepherd as a role model for a father shows us several important things. Jesus as Shepherd and God as Father **provides boundaries** for the sheep. Notice I said 'provide', not 'enforce'. Sheep, like humans, do not respond well to enforcement. They are stubborn creatures and when forced into behaviors they become more stubborn. In Isaiah 29, the prophet says, "*Those who err in spirit will come to understanding*" (29:24). Crossing the boundaries may lead to exceptional difficulties, but the boundaries are *provided*. Even the consequences are explained. When they are crossed, the consequences can be painful, but returning to God always means a return to *understanding, forgiveness and love*.

Jesus as Shepherd and God as Father **shows strength and expresses strength**, but it is always strength in the service of and for the sake of gentleness.

Jesus as Shepherd and God as Father **provides protection**, not as an act of force, but always for the sake of spiritual growth.

Jesus the Shepherd and God as Father **gives wisdom**, not for its own sake but always for the sake of right thinking, right action, right focus.

And Jesus the Shepherd and God as Father **make themselves dependable and indispensable** in the lives of those they care for, always for the sake of humility (an understanding of the true source of all that we have) and for the sake of freedom. Freedom is never possible without the presence of boundaries. I don't know what a lack of boundaries is called, but the word for it is not 'freedom'.

If we are using Jesus as our role model for fathering, and we understand God as Father, there is one more aspect to fathering in Scripture that helps all this make sense. It may be the most important aspect of all. Remember the first line of our reading today from John. John says, "*See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God, and that is what we are*" (3:1). What fathers do in Scripture is **provide blessing and inheritance**. When we speak of inheritance in Scripture, we need to be clear - it is not an exchange of money and wealth. It is a passing on of the father's relationships, the father's wisdom, the father's experience, the father's accumulated wealth, knowledge and vision. Inheritance in Israel and in the Mediterranean was, at its core, the son stepping into the footsteps of the father, walking the same path with the same people,

with the father's reputation and honor.

Think about this in relation to what Paul tells us, that Christ is the heir of all that God has created and we are the adopted children of God through Christ and are therefore co-heirs with Christ. What are we inheriting? Everything that is Christ's - all the blessings, all the authority, everything that is Christ's is ours. This all comes from the Father - Creator, Redeemer, Caregiver, the Source of All Things and All Being. The inheritance is a holy thing, a "*hallowed*" way, because it has all been given to us by way of Christ in the name of the Father.

That was some heavy theology right there, but John and Paul mean what they say. When God is in the role of Father, many things look different from that perspective. God in the role of Father changes how we see ourselves in relation to God. At Jesus' baptism and at the Transfiguration, the voice from Heaven says the same thing, "*You are my only Son; in you I am well pleased.*" These are words that can only come from a loving Father, a loving God. These are words all of us need to hear, every day. "*You are my child; in you I am well pleased.*" This is why a long line of Christian thinkers, from Augustine to Aquinas to Luther to Wesley to Jonathan Edwards have all said at some point, "*Every day, remember your baptism*" because these are the words Jesus heard at his baptism, and they are words you heard at your baptism.

Only a loving Father could say such a thing. God may be lots of things: a loving Father; a comforting Mother; a victorious King. Always, God is the Savior who has come to earth. Always God is the Spirit which blows wherever the wind may blow. And God the Father is always Love. "*God is Love*" John says, and that is why we can pray with gratitude, without concern for offense or exclusion and with absolute trust "*Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name...*"

AMEN