

Sunday, July 24, 2022
Seventh Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 12 (Year C)

Luke 11.1-13

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/3011055962519349>

(Sermon begins at about 23:15)

“OUR Father”

The disciples were very familiar with Jesus’ relationship with God. That God—at least, according to Jesus—was his father. Now, how literally they took that is anyone’s guess. Did they really believe that Jesus was the actual, physical, Son of God? Or did they believe that Jesus, as the Messiah, the Anointed One, the One chosen by God to be his chief messenger, was the metaphorical son of God? Just as we would recognize any person—regardless of their messianic status—as a son or daughter, as a child, of God. Regardless of their own understanding, the disciples had certainly become accustomed to hearing Jesus refer to God as Father. In fact, there are places in the Gospels where Jesus refers to God as Abba, which we translate as “Father,” but is more accurately translated as “Daddy” or some other more intimate and familiar term for father. So, yeah, it would have been pretty obvious to the disciples that Jesus had a close and intimate relationship with God as his Father.

While we are used to thinking of God as Father, such thinking would not have been commonplace, or even normal, for Jesus’ disciples. It may be okay for Jesus to think of God as Father, but they most likely would not have been comfortable viewing God as their Father. In that time and culture, the role and place of “father” was viewed very differently than we commonly view it today. In a time when women were second-class citizens at best and often viewed as property, and children were even lower in status than women, the father as head of the family had absolute power over the lives of family members. Far-reaching and coercive power that even extended to control over adult children. Now, how that authority was wielded, how the father actually dealt with the members of his own family, varied father by father, family by family. And we certainly see throughout the Old Testament examples of fathers who were kind, loving, and benevolent toward their children. But the absolute authority that came with the role of father would have been there, in the back of the mind of those subject to their father. As my own father once noted with respect to who has authority over whom in the military, the one with the superior rank never thinks about it and the one who is subordinate never forgets it. In other words, awareness of who has authority over you becomes a part of you.

So, absolute authority notwithstanding, thinking of God in familial terms, as Father, would have been unusual in Jesus’ time. The Old Testament—the only Scripture Jesus and the disciples would have known—does not generally refer to God as Father. There are a few passages in the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Malachi. But aside from those rare examples, the writers of the Hebrew Bible “lay greater emphasis on our distance from God and the reserve we should feel before him. God is revealed more as separate from us and beyond us, and he is seen less as intimate and close to us.”¹

With that as background, let us turn to our Gospel reading for today. One of Jesus' disciples comes to him and asks him to teach them how to pray. Jesus gives a basic model for prayer; a truncated or simplified version of what we know as the Lord's Prayer. But what Jesus is doing here, particularly in starting this model prayer the way he does, is far more than teaching them to pray. He tells them, "When you prayer, say: Father, hallowed be your name," and then goes from there. He does not tell them to start their prayer by addressing it to God or Yahweh or Jehovah or Elohim or El Shaddai—all common names for God used in the Hebrew Bible. He tells them to address their prayer to "Father." This is undoubtedly a little startling for the disciples. Taking them out of their comfort zone in their dealing with the Divine.

In teaching the disciples how to pray, Jesus is inviting them into a deeper, more intimate relationship with God than they had previously had, or at least been aware of. Deeper and more intimate than they would have dared thought possible. He is inviting them into the same relationship he has with God—with his Father. In the very words of the model for prayer he teaches them, he invites them to view God not just as his Father, but as their Father. And to address God as such. Through this model for prayer, as well as the discussion that follows, Jesus is seeking to show the disciples that God as Father is anything but the authoritarian image of father prevalent in their time. That the "fatherhood of God be qualified in terms of generosity, compassion, care, and faithful activity on behalf of God's children."² In addition, the model for prayer also provides guidance on how to nurture and live into that relationship with God as Father.

The form, the structure, of the prayer Jesus models is significant in itself. It is very methodical, designed to hit all the key points that should to be included in prayer.

"Father, hallowed be your name." We start off this—and ideally every prayer—with a recognition of God's glory. With thanksgiving for God and all God has done for us, before jumping into our own requests.

"Your kingdom come." Recognition that the ultimate goal of what God is doing in Creation is the establishment and fulfillment of God's kingdom. The implication here, which is emphasized in our addition of the term "thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," is that we have a part to play in the coming of God's kingdom.

"Give us each day our daily bread." Asking that God provide for our needs. What we truly need, not what we think we need or what we want. Recognition that it is ultimately God who provides for our needs. And an implied gratitude for God providing for those needs.

"And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us." Recognition that we are flawed human beings. That no matter what we do, we fall short of living into the ideal of what God asks of us and desires for us. That we humbly come before God, asking forgiveness for the umpteenth time, knowing that in his unbounded love for us, God is happy and willing to provide that forgiveness. And, at the same time, recognizing that out of gratitude for God's continual willingness to forgive us, we likewise need to be willing to forgive those who have wronged us.

“And do not bring us to the time of trial.” Asking that God protect us from difficulty and harm. Also recognizing that times of difficulty and trial are an inherent part of what it means to be human. As such, asking God for the strength and guidance to deal with and withstand whatever may come our way, knowing that he is there to support us. As a side note, “do not bring us to the time of trial” is perhaps a better translation than our use of “lead us not into temptation.” Which prompts some to ask why God would actually lead us into temptation. Whereas the real meaning is asking that God lead us and give us the strength to follow his ways so that we do not succumb to temptation. An important distinction.

So, the Lord’s Prayer can be summed up as a way of praising God; acknowledging our part in bringing about God’s kingdom; and asking that God provide for our needs, including forgiveness, strength, and guidance. All with implied gratitude. And all of it done with the attitude of a beloved child approaching and beseeching a loving and generous parent who only wants the best for us. Not with the attitude of approaching a capricious, all-powerful deity who could just as easily smite us as give us the time of day.

In what follows the model of the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus provides further discussion with the intent of helping the disciples further understand that God is not the distant, potentially vengeful God that some might envision and is much more like a loving father. He does this by using examples from human life. In so doing Jesus defines in what sense it is appropriate for us to think of God as Father.

The example of a friend repeatedly asking for bread ends with Jesus saying, “I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.” A message that we are to be persistent in our going to God in prayer. That we are to be persistent in beseeching God for what is most pressing in our thoughts and on our hearts. And that in our persistence, if that is what we truly desire as opposed to just expressing a random whim, God will give us what we need. Again, what we truly need, not what we think we need or what we want just because.

Jesus gives another couple of examples. “Is there anyone among you 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!” Emphasizing God’s expansive goodness and generosity to those who are faithful. To the point of giving the Holy Spirit. Giving of God’s self in the form of the Spirit, as an ongoing companion and guide, as an ongoing means of support and nurture, as an ongoing demonstration of the unbounded love God has for us. What greater gift could we wish to receive from the one who is our true and ultimate Father?

We have an easier time thinking of God as Father than did the disciples. And yet, it can be all too easy to view God as unapproachable, even in our own time. In today’s Gospel reading, Jesus gives his disciples and us a model for prayer. For how to approach God. What we call the Lord’s Prayer. Or what our Roman Catholic sisters and brothers aptly call the “Our Father.” This is more than a model for prayer. This is more than words we say every time we come together for

worship. This is an invitation to embrace and share in the most intimate relationship Jesus has: that between him and God, between him and his Father. A relationship characterized by a goodness and generosity, by a deep abiding love, that far exceeds any other relationship we can possibly have. Whenever we pray these words, we need to remember that they are Jesus' personal invitation to deeper relationship with his Father, who desires to also be our Father, as well.

¹ Ray Ortlund, "What Does the Bible Say About God as Our Father," Crossways, June 19, 2022.
<https://www.crossway.org/articles/what-does-the-bible-say-about-god-as-our-father/>

² *The New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with Apocrypha* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 1875.