

## Our Abba in Heaven, Hear Our Prayer

Matthew 6:4

*Rooted and Grounded* is our theme this Lent. We are exploring and affirming five important roots of our life together here: Prayer, Worship, Community, Missions and Social Justice.

You may have read some of the new research on trees: that the root systems of one tree are connected to the root systems of the trees around it, and the roots even communicate with one another. Think of our church's roots that way.

Today we explore prayer, most centrally the Lord's Prayer, which will be the subject of the first five sermons of Lent. Jesus' disciples had watched how Jesus lived and watched him at prayer. They wanted to learn to pray as Jesus did and experience its sustenance. So they implored him one day: "Lord, teach us how to pray." And Jesus began, "Pray like this: Our Abba who art in heaven." We have sung together the beautiful paraphrase of the Lord's Prayer today:

Abba God in heaven....

hear our prayer.

Now we explore the meaning of the prayer, so that as we go through Lent we might not just *say* it— "Let us say the Lord's Prayer"— but *pray* it.

We begin with the word “Our”. We pray this prayer in community. Even when we pray it alone we pray it in the midst of a community of faith. And we pray it not just as part of the community of the church, but also the community of the whole world. We are connected with all God’s children in deeper ways than we ever know. To be fully human is to live as part of one another. We have too much “My” in our religion today, *My* God, *My* church, *My* religion, *My* relationship with God. Jesus begins with “Our.”

## II

“Our Abba”, Jesus’ word for Father in his own Aramaic tongue. Abba, like the child’s earliest babbling of Poppa, Daddy. But it was not a childish address but child-like. It was occasionally used in Jesus’ time, but it was always used by Jesus as he prayed. All nine prayers but one in the gospels begin “Abba.” Mark’s gospel draws the curtain back a bit as he records Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane, the night of Jesus’ arrest:

*Abba, Father, all things are possible to you; remove this cup!* (Mark 14:36)

Jesus always prayed Abba, except once, when from the cross he prayed, quoting Psalm 22: “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” The Abba he loved and trusted seems to have momentarily vanished as he experienced the depths of human forsakenness. He took on our full humanity, even that.

So we ask, What was the Abba-ness of the God to whom Jesus prayed, the character of the God Jesus called Abba? I know few questions more important than this. Was God the Unmoved Mover of Greek philosophy? The “Almighty God” of the Old Testament, whose power caused everything that happened to happen?

The heart of Jesus’ spirituality was that he knew himself and experienced himself as the beloved child of God, Abba’s child. And he wanted us all to know God as Abba and experience ourselves as a beloved child of God. The Apostle Paul says that this is a gift of the Spirit, that we too can pray Abba.

Jesus’ relationship to God as Abba was one of intimacy, trust, confidence and obedience. Who was this God Jesus called Abba? Did Jesus bring a new awareness of God?

John Cobb, one of the leading theologians of our day, wrote a book he called “*Jesus’ Abba*.” In it he explored this question: What was the character of the God to whom Jesus prayed? And Cobb then asks us: Is there something about God we can “affirm enthusiastically and worship whole-heartedly?”

The God Jesus called Abba was not the *Almighty God*, all powerful who controls all that happens in the world. Not the *Mechanistic God* who created the world, set up its laws and rules, then stepped out. Not the *Monarchial God* who

presides over the world as king. No. The God Jesus called Abba was the God of steadfast love who works, in John Cobb's words, "...in and through natural things and especially in and through human beings."<sup>1</sup>

Jesus' Abba, Cobb says, is not a "unilateral actor." God works with us to achieve the purposes of God. God does not control everything that happens, but is always at work guiding us, luring us with love to work together with God in the healing and redemption of the world.

Paul glimpsed this vision of God as in his words:

We know that in everything [the good and the bad] God works for the good of those who love God, who are called according to God's purposes.

(Romans 8:28)

Some people hang on to a God who controls all things, omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient. There is comfort there, but this is not the Abba of Jesus.

Some oppose God's purposes, but God works in the midst of it all with people like us to find and achieve that purpose. Even the cross.

Is this the kind of God we can affirm and worship whole-heartedly?

### III

Now let's move to the difficulty of the word "Father" in our prayers. It is no small hinderance for those who have been abused by their fathers. Or, for women in general who have suffered because of the patriarchal male supremacy of our culture and yes, religion.

Men too have suffered in their own way, forced into the mold of expectations. Today we are seeing all the damaging effects of that toxic masculinity. Jesus! Teach us how to pray!

In Alice Walker's classic, *The Color Purple*, there is a young character named Shug. She has suffered sexual abuse and is having trouble praying. Shug says to her older friend and confidant:

Whenever you trying to pray, and man plop himself on the other end of it, tell him to get lost, say Shug. Conjure up flowers, wind, rock.<sup>2</sup>

She was trying, in her words, to get "the old white man" out of her head as she prayed.

So how do we pray the "Our Father?" We can quietly murmur our own words instead. All worship language points beyond itself to God, who is mystery and is love, to the "God beyond God", that is the God of our own religious traditions. It is a help to me to substitute Abba.

Perhaps this: When you pray the Lord's prayer, think of the times you have been cherished as a beloved child, and by whom. Picture his or her face as you pray to the one who is even more, infinitely loving.

Clarence Jordan, whose *Cotton Patch* version of the Lord's Prayer we will use next Sunday, says that this address to God also assures us that the universe is good, friendly, not hostile, and we, to use his Georgia farmer's words,

...are not weevils caught in the grinding burrs of the corn mill.

The One "who sits in heaven is our Friend and kind."<sup>3</sup>

Somedays this may be hard to believe, but Jesus' prayer helps us pray (and sing): "This is my Abba's world."

It is easy to get focused on the evil in the world, but there is a deep-down goodness and beauty to it as well. The good is all about us. The other day Sue and I were looking out the window at the blossoming cherry tree and watched as a sparrow gorged itself on the blossoms. "The world is charged with the glory of God." Abba's world.

#### IV

Our Father *in heaven*", Jesus teaches us to pray, a God beyond our best human thoughts. A God most high, most near, most good, good beyond our imaginings. As God said through Isaiah:

For my thoughts are not your thoughts

neither are your ways my ways....

For as the heavens are higher than the earth

so are my ways higher than your ways

and my thoughts than your thoughts. (Isaiah 55:8-9)

Any one name, one image, one concept of God, even “Father”, can become a graven image, an idol, if it is the only one we use. The words “in heaven” help preserve the mystery of God.

God writes God’s name with Jesus so we can wholeheartedly pray this prayer.

## V

“Our Abba in heaven *hallowed be your name.*” A little girl discovered she had been praying the Lord’s Prayer the wrong way—the way she was hearing it. So she prayed, “Our Father who are in heaven”, then instead of “hallowed be your name”, said, “How did you know my name?” Her wonder captures the deep sense of this prayer.

It is the first of three “you” petitions of the prayer, the first of three requests for God’s help (We’ll cover the other two next week). “Hallowed be thy name”, we pray.

Is this a prayer for God to come in such demonstrable power and glory that all the world will hallow God's name? That we all will sing with the angels gathered around God's throne, "Holy, Holy, Holy"? Yes, that. If our prayer begins "Abba, Abba, Abba", now it says, "Holy, Holy, Holy".

The central Jewish prayer, the Kaddish, which Jesus often prayed, expressed it this way:

Magnified and sanctified  
may God's name be  
in the world God made.

Do these words also mean that we are asking God to help *us* hallow God's name through our actions and words? Yes, that too.

I remember the day I was first struck by these words in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm:

He leads me in the paths of righteousness  
for *His* name's sake.

Not for our name's sake, but for God's name's sake.

We can sully the name of God by how we live, by our words and actions. We do so when our religious bumper stickers don't match our lives. We do so when we use God's name to back our own cause, not God's cause. Unfortunately, Christians can give God a bad reputation.



So we pray for God to help us hallow God's name by how we live. To honor it and keep it holy.

## VI

There are no more important words Jesus spoke than these, the mere 68 words in the Greek New Testament. There is a simplicity to this prayer, a child-like quality; and as we will discover as we go through the prayer this Lenten season, a revolutionary dimension.

The words of this prayer have helped form our faith. In the late 2<sup>nd</sup> century treatise "The Apostolic Tradition", its author Hippolytus urged the followers of Jesus to pray the Lord's Prayer three times a day, following the Jewish practice of praying at three set times every day. One Lent I decided to pray the Lord's Prayer at noon every day, and it was a strength. In the Lenten booklet prepared for you there are six different versions of the Lord's Prayer, and we invite you to pray each week's version once a day as we walk together toward the Cross and the Resurrection.

Jesus could have given us a manual of discipline—one might say that the Sermon on the Mount is a disciple's manual. He could have left a set of theological writings. What he gave us instead was a prayer, this one. So as we end

the sermon let's sing the first verse again of the sung version we sang earlier, to KumBaYa.

Abba God in heaven,  
Lord most high;  
hear you children's prayer,  
Lord most high;  
hallowed be your name,  
Lord most high  
O Lord, hear our prayer.

May your kingdom come  
here on earth;  
may your will be done  
here on earth,  
as it is in heaven,  
so on earth  
O Lord, hear our prayer.

Lead us in your way,  
make us strong;  
when temptations come,  
make us strong;  
Save us all from sin,  
keep us strong,  
O Lord, hear our prayer.

All things come from you,  
all are yours;  
kingdom, glory, power,  
all are yours;  
take our lives, our gifts,  
all are yours,  
O Lord, hear our prayer.

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1. John Cobb, *Jesus' Abba: The God Who Has Not Failed* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 109.
  2. Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (N.Y.: Washington Square Press, 1982), 179.

3. Clarence Jordan, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Valley Forge, PA. 1970), 85-6.