



Sermon, September 11, 2016
Rev. Dr. Craig S. Pesti-Strobel
Coburg and Junction City United Methodist Churches

The Prayer that Changes Us: “Abba, Father”

Matthew 6:9-13

Authorized (King James) Version (AKJV)

9 After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. **10** Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as *it is* in heaven. **11** Give us this day our daily bread. **12** And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. **13** And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.

Call to Worship:

(A Meditation on the first two words of the Lord's Prayer) Found online at <http://www.songofhome.com/Klotz.htm>

Leader: O Birther! Father-Mother of the Cosmos, you create all that moves in light.

People: O Thou! The Breathing Life of all, Creator of the Shimmering Sound that touches us.

Respiration of all worlds, we hear you breathing--in and out-- in silence.

Source of Sound: in the roar and the whisper, in the breeze and the whirlwind, we hear your Name.

Radiant One: You shine within us, outside us--even darkness shines--when we remember.

Name of names, our small identity unravels in you, you give it back as a lesson.

Wordless Action, Silent Potency-- where ears and eyes awaken, there heaven comes.

ALL: O Birther! Father-Mother of the Cosmos!

The conundrum of language and metaphor

Thirty years when I was in Seminary, the Inclusive Language movement was at the height of its endeavor to move our language beyond a reliance on masculine descriptions of God, and the use of the restrictive “man” to represent all humankind. This compelled me to consider carefully how I relate to God. What words do I use to address the eternal and everlasting source and absolute foundation of all things, the all-encompassing matrix of reality in which all things, seen and unseen, live, move and have their being, the Supreme Being and Ground of all Being, the unlimited horizon for All Becoming?

In that process of questioning, I encountered a Teenage boy who said, “If God is a father anything like mine, I won’t have anything to do with Him.” That was counterbalanced by a neighboring pastor, who had a

The Prayer that Changes Us: "Abba, Father"

similar father to the teen age boy, who said of his relationship with God "Now I have the loving father I never had growing up." These two experiences spoke for hundreds of similar experiences I have encountered along the way, and they all point to the conundrum of describing that which is beyond human language in terms of every day human experience.

The call to worship we read this morning attempts to help move us beyond the images and caricatures of God as being this bearded, robed grandfatherly figure. One of my favorite illustrations of this was one particular comic from *The Far Side*, where Gary Larson depicts God as this bearded, robed figure, pulling the earth out of his oven, murmuring to himself, "Somehow I have the feeling this thing is only half-baked." The image works as comic relief, if only to point out to us the absurdity of even conceiving of God in such anthropomorphic terms.

When I went through the Academy for Spiritual Formation twenty years ago, we wrestled with the inadequacy of language, and the metaphorical nature of any of our theologizing about God. Larry Carlyle Martin quipped one day: "A word's meaning should always exceed its grasp, else what's a metaphor?"

So it is, when we pray this prayer of Jesus, we have to confront this issue head on, right from the first word on: To whom or what are we praying?

First, a little background on the usage of "Father" when referring to God:

Northern Mediterranean, influenced by Indo-European uses: Greek and Latin, Indo-Iranian uses – found in the names of gods even, "father heaven." Ancient Indo-Iranian usage: "the concept of the author of being, which is clothed in the name, father, is found already in in the form *Dyaúš pita*, father heaven (cf. Gk. ΖΕΥΣ ΠΑΤΗΡ, ΔΕΙΠΑΤΥΡΟΣ, Lat. Juppiter) in the ancient documents of Indian religion. (TDNT V: 951)

Juppiter is originally vocative (= ΖΕΥ ΠΑΤΕΡ). This shows how common was the invocation of father heaven. The ancient *Diēs* (=ΖΕΥΣ, Sanskr. *Dyaúš*) is also found as a divine name in Latin only with *pater* (Diespiter). (V:951, n.21)

The Prayer that Changes Us: "Abba, Father"

Plato calls the idea of the good, the ultimate and supreme thing standing over all being (Resp., VI, 509b), πατήρ. This father concept is given cosmological form in the creation myth in The Timaeus. (V: 954)

However, Hebrew-Semitic cultures are very spare in their usage, where the use of "Ab" or the familiar form, "Abba" was very clearly only metaphoric. Anything that created the possibility of idolatry was discouraged, thus a "Father" modeled along the lines of earthly fathers was discouraged. (It didn't prevent the development of a patriarchal society, but it didn't refer to God along the lines of a *paterfamilias* in the manner of Indo-European cultures.) This is to say that Hebrew usage of "father" in reference to God does not expand upon biological experiences or presentations of "father." This connects with the attempt in the variant possible translations of *Abwun* that Neil Douglas-Klotz presents for us in our opening Call to Worship.

However, we encounter something very different with Jesus: Jesus refers to God as "my Father," "the Father" or "our/your Father" 39 times in Matthew, 4 times on Mark, 12 times in Luke, and 94 times in John. There is a fervency of intimacy with God, or what I like to call, a "radical intimacy."

Radical Intimacy

Prayer embeds us in this radical intimacy. The idea of Abba, Father is an expression of radical intimacy – the very nature of prayer. It immerses and embeds us in the womb of God. Prayer is, in essence, an act of radical intimacy with God. God is radically intimate with us in that we are entrusted with the task of acting as conduits for God's work of blessing the world in acts of compassion, mercy, justice and love. We are radically intimate with God by opening ourselves to God's guidance and to the shaping of our lives and characters by the Holy Spirit. There is no other way to be spiritually formed by God.

Prayer is a way of attuning our wills to the greater Will that pervades the universe. The God who called all things into being and who upholds and sustains all things desires to be known by us, and prayer is that mechanism of knowing and being made known. Prayer is the cornerstone

The Prayer that Changes Us: "Abba, Father"

of the spiritual life. As in all avenues of the human knowing of other persons, it is based in communication, conversation and dialog. It is also based in an honest opening of one's heart and inner life to the other, in this case, to God. The Psalmist expresses it eloquently:

O LORD, you have searched me
and you know me.
You know when I sit and when I rise;
you perceive my thoughts from afar.
You discern my going out and my lying down;
you are familiar with all my ways.
Before a word is on my tongue
you know it completely, O LORD.
You hem me in—behind and before;
you have laid your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,
too lofty for me to attain.
Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?
If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.
If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
if I settle on the far side of the sea,
even there your hand will guide me,
your right hand will hold me fast.
If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me
and the light become night around me,"
even the darkness will not be dark to you;
the night will shine like the day,
For you created my inmost being;
you knit me together in my mother's womb. (Psalm 139:1-13 NIV)

Practices to cultivate this radical intimacy:

The Radical Intimacy needed to say "Our Father," "Abba" requires that we cease from all our frenetic doing, and sink into being. God is the

The Prayer that Changes Us: "Abba, Father"

Supreme Being, and in order to be radically intimate with God, we need to shift our *modus operandi* to God's *modus operandi*: shift into "Being Mode" (*Modus existendi*).

This requires practice. It is the practice of mindfully and soulfully being aware of the world around us and connecting with that world. There are a number of practices that can cultivate this mindfulness. If we were on an extended retreat right now, I would have you try any of the following practices:

1. Contemplation of the natural world. Spend extended time somewhere in the natural world. Anything from hiking in a wilderness area, to sitting along a stream bank to sitting in your backyard silently watching the sunset. Spend time just sitting and observing everything around you without judgment or even categorization.
2. Mindfulness walking. Walk slowly. Don't talk. Observe everything around you: sights, sounds, feel and movement of the air, smells hovering or floating in the breeze, etc.
3. As you sit soulfully and mindfully contemplating the universe and world around you, welcome whatever metaphor or term of intimacy for the Creator and Sustainer of all that comes to your heart and mind. Address it several times. Address it with gratitude. Address it with awe. Address it with joy. Address it with devotion. Address it with love.
4. If you are at home, sit quietly with these experiences in mind. Quiet your mind gently. Close your eyes. Listen to your breathing, feel your heartbeat. Address the Divine One again with gratitude, with awe, with joy, with devotion, with love.

At this point, having settled into this place of radical intimacy, you are now ready to pray.

Next: "Who Art in Heaven" – What is Heaven and Where Is It?