

The Lord's Prayer: Our Unity

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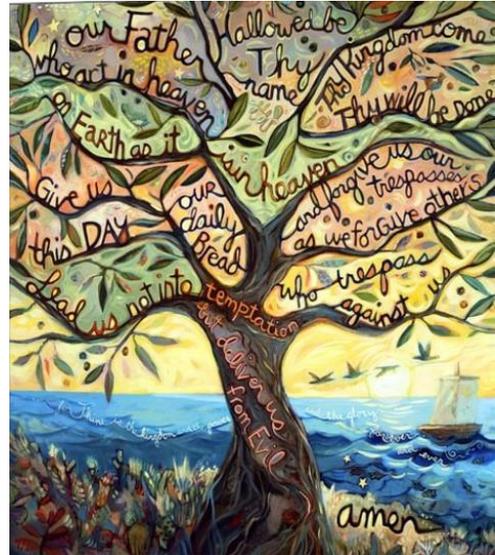
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Galatians 3:28-4:7

Matthew 5:43-44, 6:7-13

Our Father

*“Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven.”—
Matthew 6:9a*



Jen Norton

Last week we heard Jesus' response when his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray." Matthew gives a context for the Lord's Prayer that's a little different. Matthew says that great crowds were following Jesus, listening to him and asking him questions. So he went up the mountain and sat down and he began to teach them.¹ Listen:

[Jesus said,] "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, then you will be children of your Father in heaven; for God makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

"When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the heathens do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Don't be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask.

*"Pray then in this way:
Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And do not bring us to the time of trial,
but rescue us from the evil one."*

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

I'd like to begin with prayer. That seems only right. A portion of this prayer comes from a Lutheran pastor, Nadia Bolz Webber. Let us pray:

Creator God, our holy and perfect parent, all that we are and ever will be has its source and future in you. Your mercy heals our disappointments and family failures. Your Spirit plumbs the depths of our love.

You knit us together in our mother's wombs. You know us better than we know ourselves. Jesus called you "Father" and so will we, even if we don't fully understand what that means.

*Our Father who art in heaven...*our Father who brings a small measure of your heaven to every place your people are. Our Father who art in everything. You are in every part of your creation, even in those places we fear you have forsaken. Our Father who art in prisons, our Father who art in the neonatal ICU, who art in orphanages and luxury homes, Our Father who are in public schools, and law offices, and book stores, and psychiatric units, *our Father who art in heaven, Holy is your name.*

Ever since the beginning, when Adam blamed you for giving him the woman who "made him sin," ever since Jacob claimed it was your goodness and not his lust for power that made him steal his brother's birthright; ever since the beginning, we have attributed our failures to you and your name – your name has been hallowed. Your holiness has withstood generations of humans who have used your name in vain, used your name to shame or exclude others. Today we have come to open your word together. We have come to discover a new way of life, a new way to love, a new way to live together in unity with all your Creation, as children of one Heavenly Father.

Mold and mend us and shape us, we pray. For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.ⁱⁱ

Everybody prays. Some people say they don't but ... well ...you've heard that there are no atheists in fox holes. Probably true. Not many in oncologists offices either. Some things simply bring us to our knees. Jesus assumes that we pray. He didn't say, "If you pray," he said, "When you are praying ..." Everybody prays. Some complain that there's no prayer in schools, but I'm telling you, as long as there are math tests and promposels there will always be prayer in school.

He spoke those precious words to a community and culture that was saturated in prayer. Controversies constantly swirled about how, when and where Jews should pray. Rabbis taught their disciples to pray. Jews in Jesus' time prayed at least three times a day, often more. They prayed privately and in public, individually and as a congregation, sometimes using their own words, and with liturgies often from the Psalms. Listen: What Jesus' community never did was pray to God as Father.

They didn't. In the Hebrew Bible (what we call the Old Testament) people approached God with many names: Lord God Almighty (*El Shaddai*) Most High God (*El Elyon*) Lord and Master (*Adoni*) Sovereign God (*El*) and King (*Melech*) but they did not call God "Father" ... it just didn't happen. In the psalms, the prayer book of the Bible, I was able to find one instanceⁱⁱⁱ --

only one, in Psalm 86 where the psalmist addresses God as Father. With the help of the Wednesday Bible Study – thank you Lee Laque – I was able to find another. That’s twice in the 23,000 verses of the Old Testament where someone prayed to God as Father. In 3rd Isaiah, the Prophet of the Reconstruction prayed,

You, O Lord, are our father, our Redeemer of old is your name. ^{iv}

The Hebrew people almost never prayed to God as Father, but Jesus certainly did. Think of how often Jesus addressed God this way. He didn’t call God Father occasionally, he did it all the time, and more frequently as he drew nearer to the cross. In the garden he prayed:

*As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they be also in us.^v
Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me.* ^{vi}

On the cross he said,

Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. ^{vii}

We even know the exact words he used. He said, *Pater*, Father. Sometimes he even used the familiar, *Abba*. It’s not a Hebrew word at all, but Aramaic, the language of everyday people. That’s the way Jesus talked to God. Why do you think he did that? It’s a radical departure from the way his people prayed. I think it has everything to do with his role and relationship as Son of God. Jesus taught us to pray to God as Father because of who he is...the Son of God...and who he intends for us to be as the children of God.

It was made clear right from the start. In the Christmas story, when the angel announced to Mary,

The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ^{viii}

In order to be the Son, there has to be a Father.

This is not to say that Jesus is some sort of hybrid – half human, half God. Greco-Roman mythology had plenty of those. Rulers and kings from Egypt to China were worshiped as “sons of heaven.” Jesus’ nature is different. He is both God and man, simultaneously and eternally. The technical term is Hypostatic union. He was, from the beginning fully human *and* fully God. But this is not some pie-in-the-sky idea for philosophers and theologians.

Abba is a family word. It expresses intimacy and loving care while it also contains respect. Sometimes *Abba* is translated “Daddy” or “Papa,” but that really doesn’t do the name justice. It is simply another word for father. *Abba* is a personal, involved, and knowing father. It is JFK, Jr. under the desk in the Oval Office. It’s the story of the emperor who approached the gates of Rome in a triumphal procession. Suddenly a child darted toward the chariot. The praetorian guards seized the child, shouting “That is the emperor!” “Your emperor!” the boy replied, “but he’s my father.” ^{ix}

That's the spirit, a spirit of perfect trust and confidence that Jesus displays when he prays to God as Father: God as Protector, Savior, Redeemer, Liberator, Provider...in other words, the perfect Father.

Now let me pause here and recognize that the image of God as Father does not work for everyone. For some it is too folksy, too anthropomorphic or too male. During my clinical training I worked with teen girls and women who had been physically and sexually abused, and some of them trafficked by their fathers, stepfathers, mother's boyfriends, or other men in their lives. These women simply could not pray to God as father, and that's okay. Their prayers were just as authentic as any others. Christians have always believed that God is larger and greater than any human definitions of gender.

Besides, we have a Bible filled with female images of God. Jesus famously described God -- as a woman who sweeps the houses searching for the lost coin of Israel;^x Hosea, the prophet, called God a mother and envisions her teaching Ephraim to walk;^{xi} Isaiah, places the image of God as mother in God's own mouth saying:

As a mother comforts her child, so shall I comfort you.^{xii}

More than once Jesus calls himself a mother hen.^{xiii} The psalmist prays to God as mother in Psalm 123.^{xiv} In the first account of creation in Genesis we read that: *God made humankind in God's own image, male and female God created them.*^{xv}

All of that does not diminish the beauty and intimacy of Jesus' habit of praying to God as Father. It is simply to say that Father is not the only image of God Jesus gives us. It was revolutionary, never forget that; but praying to God as Father is not a radical idea expressed in this phrase, "Our Father." The truly unprecedented idea expressed here is in that little pronoun "Our."

While Jesus prayed "my father", he taught us to pray "Our Father." There is a difference. Albert Curry Winn, the great Presbyterian theologian and General Assembly moderator wrote:

"God is not [my] private father. If you are a child in a large family, you learn very quickly that there are some things you cannot ask your father to do. If you were an only child you might ask, but God has no only children. ... There are bounds... you cannot ask to rise on the bleeding back of a brother or sister."^{xvi}

The "Our Father" links us to every other believer, and nonbeliever for that matter; in fact, calling God "Our Father" connects us to every part of Creation. It reminds us that we cannot pray alone. The Christian life is personal, but it is never private. We are in this together, so when Virginia Beach suffers from gun violence, we all suffer. When farmers in Arkansas and Oklahoma struggle after millions of acres of crops are destroyed by historic flooding, we are part of that. We feel the effects of climate change too; we are brothers and sisters who share the same Father.

Chuck Manto is a lay member of our congregation (and our choir) who has done extensive work on the Sermon on the Mount, particularly in regard to Jesus' teachings on peacemaking. Chuck has convinced me of the link between Jesus' command to *love your enemies and pray for those*

who persecute you, and the phrase, “Our Father.” In other words: Our Father is not simply the Father of our friends; God is the father of our enemies as well.

Here’s an uncomfortable question: How does it feel to know that we share the same father with the Virginia Beach shooter? It makes me feel considerably more responsible to take action. If we are siblings, then gun violence is not someone else’s problem, it’s mine, and yours.

How does it feel to share the same Father with the gorillas, sea turtles and orangutans, and the one to 2,000 species of God’s perfect creatures that will go extinct this year? We may not speak the same language, but we share the same Father.

We have an amazingly loving and patient Father, but, there are times when God clearly wants us, as the managers of this mess, to say “Enough! Stop the madness!”

God has not given up on us. Though sometimes, for the life of me I can’t see why. Instead, God came to us in Jesus to teach us how to love – each bit of God’s creation in each of its varied parts. God came to us in Jesus to teach us that every one – even those who claim they are our enemies and persecutors, even those are the children of God. Even those situations that seem entirely hopeless are not outside of the protection, salvation, and redemption of God.

Two men were talking one day about the terrible problems that one of the men was having with his son. The first man said, "If he were my son, I would throw him out." The second man replied, "If he were your son, I would do the same thing. But he's not your son; he's mine...and I could never throw him out."

That’s the God we call "Our Father..."

ⁱ Matthew 5:1-2

ⁱⁱ Portions of this prayer are paraphrased from a prayer by Nadia Bolz Weber, “The Lord’s Prayer – extended dance mix, a sermon” *Patheos.com* www.patheos.com/blogs/nadiabolzweber/2016/07/the-lords-prayer-extended-dance-mix-a-sermon/ retrieved 5-26-19

ⁱⁱⁱ Psalm 86:26

^{iv} Isaiah 63:16b

^v John 17:21

^{vi} Lue 22:42

^{vii} Luke 23:34

^{viii} Luke 1:35

^{ix} Albert Curry Winn, *A Christian Primer: The Prayer, the Creed, the Commandments*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1990, 27

^x Luke 15:8-10

^{xi} Hosea 11:3-4

^{xii} Isaiah 66:13

^{xiii} Matthew 23:37 and Luke 13:34

^{xiv} Psalm 123:2-3

^{xv} Genesis 1:27

^{xvi} Winn, op. cit., 28