

**Our Father in Heaven
(Lord, Teach Us to Pray, Part 1)**

Matthew 6:7-9a; John 14:1-11

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First
Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on August 6, 2017]

I

The poet Walter de la Mare penned these words:

*"Is anybody there?" said the Traveler,
Knocking on the moonlight door;
And his horse in the silence chomped the grasses
Of the forest's ferny floor;
And a bird flew up out of the turret,
Above the Traveler's head;
And he smote upon the door a second time;
"Is anybody there?" he said.
But no one descended to the Traveler;
No head from the leaf fringed sill
Leaned over and looked into his gray eyes;
Where he stood perplexed and still.*

The question of the Traveler in de la Mare's poem has been asked throughout human history.

Who among us has not at one time in our lives stood on the beach,
or deep in the woods,
or on top of a mountain,
or looked into the blackness of space and asked,
"I wonder...is anybody there?"

Who has not been through the trials and tribulations of life—
the sudden death of a loved one,
the dark night of the soul,
the moments of doubt or despair,
and asked the eternal question:

"Is anybody there?"

"Does anybody care?"

"Is anybody listening?"

"Does anybody understand?"

II

Some have answered this question with a wistful agnosticism.

Is anybody there?

We just don't know.

We hope there is,
but we can never be sure.

Nineteenth century agnostic Robert Ingersoll stood at the grave of his brother and spoke of life as...

"a narrow veil between the cold and barren peaks of two eternities. We strive to look beyond their heights. We cry aloud, and the only answer is the echo of our wailing cry."

Some have answered the question with a bitter atheism.

Is anybody there?

No...there is no one there at all.

German writer Jean Paul Richter said,

"I have transversed the world. I have risen to the suns. I have passed toward the great waste places of the sky. There is no God! I have gazed into the gulf beyond and cried: 'Where art Thou?' And no answer came. We are orphans, you and I; every soul in this vast corpse trench of the universe is utterly alone."

Richard Dawkins, who along with Sam Hill, Daniel Dennett, and the late Christopher Hitchens, is one of the so-called "new" atheists, said:

We are all atheists about most of the gods that societies have ever believed in. Some of us just go one god further.

Some have answered the question with the vision of a deity that is impersonal and indifferent.

One day God wound up the clock of the universe, and now it runs totally on its own.

This is the philosophy known as Deism—the belief in a distant Creator who does not intervene in the affairs of this world.

Many of the Founding Fathers of our nation were Deists.

Benjamin Franklin wrote:

"I cannot conceive otherwise than that He, the Infinite Father, expects or requires no worship or praise from us, but that He is even infinitely above it." ---from "Articles of Belief and Acts of Religion", Nov. 20, 1728

And Thomas Paine wrote,

"The Deist needs none of those tricks and shows called miracles to confirm his faith, for what can be a greater miracle than the creation itself, and his own existence?"

**Some have answered by trying to define the indefinable,
trying to name the unnamable,
trying to explain the unexplainable.**

So for Aristotle God was the "Unmoved Mover,"
for Spencer the "Eternal Energy,"
for Huxley the "Unknown Absolute,"
for Arnold the "Power not ourselves that makes for
righteousness,"
for Tillich, "The Ground of Being."

But...in contrast to all of these human efforts to name the One behind the universe, Jesus simply said, "Father."

It is impossible to read the Gospels without noticing how again and again the word, "Father," drops from the lips of Jesus.

His practice of prayer was rooted in a sense of intimacy with God as his heavenly Father.

"Is anybody there?" we ask. And Jesus answers,

*"Yes, the Father is there. And when you pray, pray this way:
'Our Father, who art in heaven...'"*

III

We should note that Jesus was not the first to use the idea of God as Father.

Long before him the Greeks had the idea of Zeus as the father of all the gods.

But at best Zeus was indecisive and indefinite.

At worst he was arbitrary and vindictive.

Seven times in the Hebrew Scriptures God is referred to as Father.

*"As a father has compassion for his children,
so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him,"*
said the psalmist. (Psalm 103:13)

But it was Jesus who transformed the concept of God as Father.

He brought it to life and filled it with love, mercy, and compassion.

He added a dimension which put flesh and blood to the picture.

When Jesus was in the upper room with his disciples, he was teaching them the things they would need to know to carry on his work after his death.

He spoke to them of the Father, as he had done so many times before.

Then Phillip, as though he had never heard the words of Jesus, said to him,
"Show us the Father and we will be satisfied."

Jesus made one of the most staggering statements of all time:
"Whoever has seen me has seen the Father."

There Jesus sat, seemingly just like one of his disciples.

He was clothed as they were in human flesh.

He ate and drank as they did.

His hands were rough and calloused from the carpenter's shop,
as theirs were.

Yet he was saying to them,

"Whoever has seen me has seen the Father."

"I am in the Father and the Father is in me."

"I and the Father are one."

IV

Is anybody there?

Yes, says Jesus, the Father is there.

What is the Father like?

He is like Jesus.

Jesus is the window through which we glimpse God.

As Christians, we relate to God through Jesus Christ,
and we pray to God the way Jesus taught us to pray.

When we pray "Our Father in heaven," we affirm several things.

First, we affirm that **God is a personal God.**

We relate to God intimately as person to person, friend to friend.

Jesus used the word, "Abba," an Aramaic word that means "Daddy."

Abba was an everyday word that children used to speak to their fathers...
and it was used by adults, too, in speaking to their fathers.

I am not too old to recall that the first sounds my daughters began to make were,
"Da da da da."

In the Middle East, the first sounds children make are, "Aba, aba, aba."

So that is where the word Abba comes from.

It is a word that portrays an intimate relationship of love, trust, and security.

But no Jew would have dared to address God in this manner.

For Jews the name of God, YAHWEH, was so holy that they would not even
pronounce it,
instead substituting the more common "Adoni," "Lord."

To have addressed God as "Abba" was unthinkable,
yet Jesus did it all the time.

In fact, the only prayer where Jesus does not address God as Abba is his cry from
the cross,

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Yes, God is "high and lifted up."

But Jesus wants us also to know that God is near and close at hand.

God is Abba...Daddy...Father.

A Jewish rabbi said, "An idol is near yet far; God is far yet near."

When asked what he meant, the rabbi said,

"An idolater makes an idol and sets it up in his house. So the idol is near. But one may cry unto the idol and it will not answer. Therefore, the idol is far. But God is far, yet near. From here to heaven is a journey of 500 years; therefore, God is far. But God is also near, for if a man prays and meditates in his heart, God is near to answer his prayer."

William Barclay wrote:

"Even if the dwelling place of God is in the heights of heaven, even if heaven and earth cannot contain his dazzling glory, nevertheless, because God is Father, he is in the smallest and humblest dwelling and near to the simplest heart."

So to call God "Father" at the beginning of the Lord's Prayer is to define our relationship to God.

It is to say that we don't have to go through ten administrative assistants to get to the God of the universe—
that God is as close to us as a parent.

With God, there is no call-waiting,
no voice mail,
and there is never a busy signal.

Our God is always there waiting for us.

V

Second, when we pray "Our Father, who art in heaven"
we affirm that **God loves and cares for us.**

No flower ever lifts its head without being nourished by God's care.

No sparrow ever falls from the sky without escaping God's notice.

Jesus told us that if God cares for them,
how much more will the one who is our Father care for us.

A missionary in Liberia, West Africa was invited to baptize three converts.

After the baptism the two men and one woman stood on the bank of the muddy river, wet and happy.

Never had the missionary seen three more joyful people.

"What is the best thing about this experience?" asked the missionary.

One of the three answered,

"Behind this universe stands one God, not a great number of warring spirits, as we had always believed, but one God. And that God loves me."

Sadly, there are those in this world to whom the idea of God as Father is not one of warmth and love.

There are fathers who are cruel, selfish, and distant,
fathers who abuse their families emotionally and even physically.

There are fathers who, because they were not loved as little boys, are unable to demonstrate love to their little boys and little girls.

But Jesus shows us that God alone is our loving Father.

We do not speak of God as "Father" because we have had certain experiences with our biological fathers and therefore project those experiences upon God.

Rather, all human fathers are measured and judged and fall short on the basis of our experiences of God as Father.

God the Father stands as judge over against all human fatherhood.

To pray to God as the Father challenges the status quo of human fatherhood.

And to pray "Our Father" is to affirm that there is One whose unconditional love and acceptance reaches out to us to heal, restore, and forgive.

VI

Third, when we pray "Our Father, who art in heaven"
we address the way we are to relate to one another.

Some are offended that Jesus taught us to address God as Father.

The greater scandal may be the little word, "our."

In this prayer we are taught to pray,
 not as individuals,
 but as the church.

Jesus did not say, "My Father."

He said "Our Father."

The Lord's Prayer is a "family affair,"
 a community matter.

To pray to "our Father" is to recognize that we are all children of God—
 red and yellow,
 black and white,
 we are all precious in God's sight—
 and we are all brothers and sisters to one another,
 no matter how much we might disagree.

When we pray "our Father" we recognize that God belongs to all of us—
 or rather, all of us belong to God.

Where does this take us ethically and morally?

To a place that lifts us out of our natural selfish tendencies,

to a place that reminds us that real friendship in Christ means we have the right to disagree, knowing that mutual respect and affection are not at stake.

Why? Because God is “our” Father,
the Father of all of us.

When we say "our," we are not being possessive,
as though God were our property.

Many a person has come to grief attempting to domesticate God as a cheerleader for the American Way or as a cosmic Home Shopping Network.

We say "our" because of the astounding recognition that this God,
the One who created the universe,
who flung the planets into their courses,
the great God of heaven and earth,
has willed to become our God.

Before we ever reached out to God,
God reached out to us and claimed us,
promised to be our God,
promised to make us God’s people.

We are privileged to say, “Our Father,” not because of who we are or what we have done,
but rather because of what God in Jesus Christ has done.

But we can only pray "Our Father" aright when we are willing to see ourselves as members one of another and as members of the entire human family.

That is why we pray the Lord's Prayer—
out loud, every Sunday—
as a tangible demonstration that we are all in this together.

Think how different the Christian faith would be if Jesus had taught us to pray,
"My Father...
give me this day my daily bread...
lead me not into temptation."

*You cannot pray the Lord's Prayer and even once say "I,"
 You cannot pray the Lord's Prayer and even once say "My."
 Nor can you pray the Lord's Prayer and not pray for one another,
 And when you ask for daily bread, you must include your brother.
 For others are included in each and every plea.
 From the beginning to the end of it, it does not once say "Me."*

But then Jesus adds a further qualification to let us know that our Father God is no ordinary parent—

“Our Father, who art in heaven.”

What do you suppose Jesus meant by heaven?

Not just the celestial city with gates of pearl and streets of gold.

What is heaven for you?

The perfect day that never ends with someone you really love?

The qualities of a life of peace, love, and fulfillment toward which we all strive?

I'll tell you what I think it is.

I think it's the place where no one is ever alone again...

and all the barriers between us are broken down:

husbands and wives,
 parents and children,
 races and nations.

I believe that's why Jesus says, not just “Father,” but “our Father.”

By adding “our,” he immediately places us in the middle of the whole human family,

whether we like it or not.

Now it's no longer “my” prayer to “my” God,

but “our” prayer to “our” Father.

And every time we pray, "Our Father, who art in heaven,"
 we affirm the way we are saved—
 in community—
 praying together,
 encouraging one another,
 forgiving one another,
 stumbling along with Jesus together,
 and together seeking to make his way our way.

VII

“Is anybody there?” said the Traveler.

The answer comes from Jesus—the Father is there.

And Jesus says to us, *Pray then in this way: Our Father, who art in heaven.*

What a difference it makes in our lives to believe this,
 to pray it,
 and to live it.

May you do so secure in the knowledge
 that whatever happens in life,
 there is One who is nearer to you than your own breath,
 One who loves you just as you are,
 One who continually calls you to become
 a part of the community of followers of the Son who,
 in response to a Father's love,
 gave his life for you and for me and for the entire world.

**And so we are bold to say,
 even crazy, some might say,
 “Our Father, who art in heaven.**

Amen.

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