

Our Father
Matthew 6:9-13
by the Rev. Dr. E. Scott Jones
First Central Congregational Church
29 September 2019

Today we begin our Autumn worship series which will be an in-depth study of the Lord's Prayer. We will take the prayer, line-by-line, to better understand it and to explore its spirituality and theology.

This morning, for our Gospel lesson, I will read the prayer as presented in the Gospel of Matthew, and I will read it from the King James Version—the translation of the prayer that many of us likely memorized.

Matthew 6:9-13

After this manner therefore pray ye:

Our Father which art in heaven,

Hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come,

Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

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.

For the Word of God in scripture,

For the Word of God among us,

For the Word of God within us,

Thanks be to God.

"Our Father, who art in heaven."

The opening line of the prayer that we pray in our worship most weeks immediately invites us to consider, "Who is this God we pray to?"

And we are immediately plunged into a vital issue—"By what name are we going to call God?"

This week, preparing for the sermon, I reviewed the major works of Feminist theology by writers like Mary Daly, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Mary Grey, and Sallie McFague. A generation and more ago these writers and their sisters brought to our attention in vivid and eloquent writing that the church had long worshipped an idol, with devastating effects upon women and the oppressed.

Here's Mary Daly in from *Beyond God the Father*,

The biblical and popular image of God as a great patriarch in heaven, rewarding and punishing according to his mysterious and seemingly arbitrary will, has dominated the imagination of millions over thousands of years. The symbol of the Father God, spawned in the human imagination and sustained as plausible by patriarchy, has in turn rendered service to this type of society by making its mechanisms for the oppression of women appear right and fitting.

This church and many others wrestled with these revelations a generation ago. And we continue to live in the early decades of a new Christian consciousness that has opened up our imaginations.

So how are we to address God in this most common of prayers?

Some take the lead from the Easter Orthodox tradition where Father has always been understood as a name, not an abstract title. When Sebastian calls me "Dada," he isn't reverencing a title, but expressing an intimate relationship.

But this alone does not answer the feminist critique, for they were very clearly that what names we use is precisely the issue. Yes, they can acknowledge that Jesus called God by the intimate name of "Father," but must we do the same? As Sallie McFague wrote, "We must look at [the ways we name] carefully to see if they heal or hurt."

In her groundbreaking book *Models of God*, she proposed a new Trinitarian formula of God as Mother, Lover, and Friend.

I and many of my colleagues have adopted Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer, particularly in our baptismal formula.

Mary Daly proposed that we follow the lead of the Hebrew name of God and quit using nouns. She proposed, "Why not a verb—the most active and dynamic of all?"

Rosemary Radford Ruether made clear early on that she thought "we have no adequate name" for the divine.

In a much later book, Mary Grey surveyed the work of an entire generation and concluded: "The very inexhaustibility of this mystery admits the possibility of new imagery, new naming, fresh and startling experiences of the divine."

A few months ago, on the Sunday following the terrorist attacks in Christchurch, New Zealand, for our worship we set aside the Lord's Prayer we normally recite and instead prayed a version from the *New Zealand Prayer Book*. I have always loved how that version of the prayer expands "Our Father, who art in heaven" to this:

Eternal Spirit,
Earth-maker, Pain bearer, Life-giver,
Source of all that is and that shall be,
Father and Mother of us all,
Loving God, in whom is heaven.

And so, we have listened to the revelations of these and other theologians, and for many decades now our worship has been shaped by a consciousness of the language we use, particularly in naming and referencing God, that our words should be healing and not hurtful, and that they should model the coming reign of God.

Yet, most Sundays we pray the Lord's Prayer and we say together, "Our Father who art in heaven." I know a few of you say something else, but why do we continue to use this name? The simple answer is most likely familiarity.

So, if we are going to continue to pray "Our Father," what do we mean?

For one, I believe we have learned the lesson that this is not the Patriarchal Father. This is not God, remote in heaven, issuing commands and judgments and supporting a hierarchical human society that excludes and oppresses. We reject that image as an idol unworthy of our worship.

We take our hint from Jesus himself. As Mary Grey points out, "Jesus himself . . . entered the process of 'new naming.'" By teaching us to pray "Our Father," Jesus was both drawing upon the rich tradition of the Jewish people and naming God in a new way, insisting upon an intimate, personal relationship.

I like the way theologian Timothy Bradshaw describes it—"the desire for confident and rejoicing relationship with those who enter into the movement of praise and trust established by Jesus, the beloved son."

When we pray, we pray to the God revealed in the life of Jesus of Nazareth, the God who Jesus had an intimate, personal relationship with, the one whom Jesus called "Father."

So through Jesus we learn who God is.

And in this prayer we encounter a God who is (to borrow Timothy Bradshaw's description) "enacted holiness, *living* goodness, the source of forgiveness and recreation."

If we continue to pray using the name "Our Father," then the image of Father we have is centered on Jesus. And his revelation of a God of intimate, personal relationship. We look, therefore, at the best aspects of fatherhood as we understand that in the twenty-first century.

Sebastian has been taking dance class from Marian Fey the last year. A few times my mother has been with us when we went to dance class. The first time she marveled at something. Almost all the kids in Sebastian's dance class were brought there and watched over by their fathers. Mom said, "Your Dad would never have done that."

So if we are going to continue to use the name "Our Father," I'm going to picture the kind of Dad who takes his child, of any gender, to ballet class.

The Dad who cooks supper and does the laundry and mows the lawn and fixes the car and cleans the scrapped knee and hugs and kisses and reads books and is sure to say many times every single day, "I love you."

But even this image, this name, cannot and should not and will not be the only name. For God is Mother, God is Lover, God is Spirit, God is Creator, God is Artist, God is Pain-bearer, God is Wellspring of Joy, God is Mighty Fortress, God is Wisdom, God is most likely the most dynamic of verbs, for "the very inexhaustibility of this [divine] mystery admits the possibility of new imagery, new naming, fresh and startling experiences of the divine."

All of that. I mean all of that and so much more when I bow my head and begin to pray,
as Jesus taught me to pray.