

## A REASON TO CALL GOD “FATHER”

Scriptures: Romans 8:14-17; Matthew 11:25-27

One of the best ways to understand the Lord’s Prayer is to compare it with the prayers of other religions. On the back of the bulletin this morning I have printed two prayers from other religions. The first is from the writings of Buddhism:

And having seen the Truth, having mastered the Truth, having understood the Truth, having penetrated the Truth, having overcome uncertainty, having dispelled all doubts, having gained full knowledge, dependent on nobody else for knowledge of the doctrine of the Teacher, they said to the Blessed One: “Glorious Lord! Glorious Lord! Just as if one should set up, Lord, what has been overturned, or should reveal what has been hidden, or should point out the way to one who has lost his way, or should bring a lamp into the darkness, in order that those who had eyes might see visible things, thus has the Blessed One preached the doctrine in many ways.”

Admittedly this is a long complicated sentence, but think for a moment about what picture or impression of God you get from this prayer. To me this prayer portrays God as a kind of Divine Principle. Notice how it capitalizes the word Truth. God is a principle of truth that permeates the world, and religion is the process of discovering that truth. The very word Buddhism means “enlightenment,” and the idea of Buddhism is to understand and adjust yourself to the underlying principles that govern the universe.

The second prayer is from the opening chapter of the Quran, the scriptures of Islam:

In the name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful.  
Praise belongs to God, the Lord of all beings,  
The Beneficent, the Merciful.  
Master of the Day of Judgment,  
You alone we worship, You alone we ask for help.  
Guide us on the straight path,  
The path of those to whom You have been gracious,  
Not of those with whom You are incensed  
Nor those who are straying.

Compared to Buddhism, the God pictured in this prayer is more like person than a principle. This God displays mercy and judgment. He can be gracious and he can be incensed. The God of this prayer is less like a Divine Principle and more like a Middle Eastern monarch. The religion of Islam is not about discerning some divine principle underlying the universe but about submitting to and obeying a Divine Master.

Now as Christians we also believe that God is our Master, our Lord, and that God has revealed principles by which we should live, like the Ten Commandments. Christians also think of God as a Master and a Teacher. But Jesus gave us a new way of thinking about and relating to God, and a good example of this is in our first scripture reading. In Matthew 11:25 Jesus prays,

I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.

In this prayer Jesus portrays God not as a master or a teacher but as a Father relating to his infant children. Now how does a father relate to infant children? Does the father of infant children relate to them as a teacher? Does the father of infant children try to pass on to them principles of life? Maybe later on, but not when they are infants. Does the father of infant children try to command them like a ruler? He can try, but it isn't going to do much good until they are older. No, the relationship of a father to infant children is not the relationship of a teacher to a student or a master to a subject. It is the relationship of a caregiver to those who are helpless to do anything for themselves. In other words—and this is the key—it is a relationship of grace.

This is not an exception to Jesus' way of praying. In every prayer that Jesus prays in all four gospels, he addresses God as Father. The only possible exception is on the cross when Jesus says, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" But there Jesus is quoting a psalm. Other than that, in every single prayer that Jesus utters in all four gospels, he calls God "Father." And in one case in the gospel of Mark he uses the Aramaic word *Abba*. The Aramaic word for father is *Ab*, and *Abba* is the familiar form of this word, kind of like our word "Dad."

In the Old Testament there are very few places where God is addressed as "Father." And there are no places anywhere in the Old Testament or in any other Jewish writing where God is called "*Abba*." It just was not done. It would be considered too disrespectful, too much like putting God down on our level.

But Jesus has the nerve to call God "*Abba*" and to refer to himself as the Son. In fact he says, "No one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him." In other words, Jesus is the one who shows us what God is like. Jesus is the one who shows us God's heart, and the heart of God that Jesus shows us is the heart of a Father.

But here comes the biggest surprise of all. Not only does Jesus call God "Father," not only does Jesus address God with the shockingly intimate and familiar term *Abba*, but he invites us to do the same. He teaches us to pray "Our Father ...."

It is one thing for Jesus to call God "Father." After all, Jesus was God's Son. He demonstrated that by the authority he claimed to speak for God and to forgive sins, an authority that God vindicated by raising Jesus from the dead. So we could understand how Jesus might have the nerve to call God "Father," even *Abba*. But the shocking thing is when he invites us to do it. Listen again to our second scripture lesson from Romans 8:15-16:

For you did not receive a spirit of fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God.

In the Lord's Prayer we are given the right to call God "Father" as a sign of our adoption as God's children through Jesus Christ.

I have mentioned before a book by Robert Coles called *The Spiritual Life of Children*. It is a collection of interviews with children from all over the world and from all different religions about their concepts of God. One of the children he interviews is a 10 year-old Muslim girl named Rita. At one point in the interview Rita refers to God as a friend, but then she hesitates. She says,

I shouldn't have said we can be a 'friend' of God's; that was wrong, maybe. I mean— God can choose you, He can say, 'You've been loyal, and you've followed the rules of Islam, and so I'll be having you come up here to be with me.' That's what I should have said! You're just you, but He is the one who rules the whole earth—so it's not a friendship (p. 234).

Rita understands the prayers of Islam—the prayers addressed to the "Master of the Day of Judgment." And we too, as Christians, believe that God is the Master of the Day of Judgment. That's why we are quick to add, "Our Father, *who art in heaven*." Never for a moment should we forget that the God we address in prayer is not our buddy, not our pal, but the creator of the entire universe.

Nevertheless this Lord of all creation invites you and me to be part of the family, adopted brothers and sisters with Jesus. From Jesus we learn that God is not just a master whom we are expected to obey or a teacher from whom we are expected to learn, but that God is even more a Father who welcomes us into the family and expects us to welcome others.

- Ken Onstot  
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