

GOD OUR FATHER¹

I'd like to talk about the Lord's Prayer today and for the next three weeks. When disciples wanted to learn how to pray, Jesus didn't teach them how to pray. He taught them this prayer—which is and always has been revolutionary.

It's not as if the Jewish people didn't pray in Jesus' day. I'd say they did a real good job at praying. The Jewish people stopped and prayed three times a day—at sunup, mid-afternoon, and dusk. They would pray standing, reciting the *Shema* "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord." Then there were a series of eighteen prayers that they recited. In these prayers was mention of the Kingdom of God, which of course, is important in the Lord's Prayer. Also mentioned in these prayers is a prayer for daily bread. That compares with what Jesus taught in the Lord's Prayer. So, as Jesus was teaching this prayer, his listeners were likely to be thinking that Jesus was teaching a new version of the prayer pattern that they were accustomed to.

What is really interesting are the parts of Jesus' prayer—our Lord's Prayer—that don't compare or make a departure from the Jewish prayer practice. Let me cite three of these departures:

First, Jesus' teaching of the Lord's Prayer is in the Aramaic language, which was Jesus' mother tongue. Aramaic was

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among the languages that swirled out of northern Africa and the Middle East. The shocker is that Jesus' prayer isn't in Hebrew—the official language of Judaism. The three-times-a-day Jewish prayers were always said in proper Hebrew.

Speaking generally, people tend to feel that worship is more dignified if a special language is used. Suddenly, languages like Sanskrit, Arabic, Ecclesiastical Latin, or Hebrew tend to become the proper languages for the worship of their respective religions.

We see this in our own church. A couple of years back, one of my favorite people in this congregation gently reminded me that I had lapsed into some slang expression during a sermon. I understand the concern here. First, you have to put up with a Yankee accent and then some uneducated colloquialism belonging more appropriately in the locker room or auto repair shop. You hear a little of that talk and it doesn't feel like worship any more.

So in an environment where proper, traditional, elegant language is religiously important, Jesus teaches the Lord's Prayer in everyday Aramaic rather than Hebrew. What's more, Jesus never mentions three times a day, leaving the impression that you can pray any time you feel like it. All of a sudden

prayer feels less prim, proper, and Presbyterian and it feels much more like just talking from the heart.

There's more. Once Jesus dispenses with the religious language, Hebrew, we begin to get the feeling that personal prayer really isn't supposed to have a special language or ritual. Prayer is talking with God.

Second point. Jesus teaches us to start the Lord's Prayer using the word, "abba" for father. Actually the word, father, in English is a misleading translation of abba because father is too formal. I don't get on the phone and say, "Hello Father." That would feel like I had been abandoned at birth and when I was 43 finally tracked down my father and introduced myself for the first time. "Hello, Father." What I really say, is "Hey Dad!" "Dad" is a little closer to the sense of intimacy resident in the word "abba." Daddy would actually be better. Here in the south you have your momma and daddy. But when I call Michigan I don't say on the phone, "Hi, daddy." But even daddy doesn't get the closeness and informality of "abba." Abba is closest in feeling to "da da." Da da just may be the first word most English speaking babies learn. In the Middle East today in Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, and Jordan, all Arabic speaking, the old Aramaic word abba has survived and is the first word that children are taught.

What are we learning here? We're learning not to pile up empty words in our praying: "O sovereign and glorious creator, almighty and righteous Lord. Holy and infinite thou art etc. etc. No! Da da! Our relationship with God is just that close.

Final point: Amazingly coupled with the strikingly innocent and familiar abba, is the second phrase "who art in heaven." Heaven in the Bible means both the sky and the place of God. So, in the Lord's Prayer we're not losing the awesome majesty and mystery of God who is beyond sight and touch and understanding. Rather, we're learning that when we pray we can be close to heaven; to glory; to majesty. We can simply be ourselves with the awesome creator of the Universe.

I heard the story a couple of days ago of a university professor who was given the privilege to greet Queen Elizabeth at her private residence at Windsor Castle. As we would expect the professor put on his very best clothes. He reminded himself to exercise perfect etiquette. And he happily let himself receive from someone representing the royal family specific instructions for behavior for when he was in the presence of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth.

Wouldn't you think that addressing the God of the heavens and the earth would require even greater formality and slavish submission? You would think. But Jesus opens an unexpected

door. He teaches us of God's nearness that is like a parent loving and intimate who experiences joy at the simple, "Da da."

One of the great gifts that God gives to you and me through Jesus is the gift of God's own close personal loving availability to us. God does—as the old hymn puts it — walks with me and talks with me. Think, your creator is as close as a whisper to you and wants to connect with you like a toddler connects with a parent. You're never alone talking with God all the time, not formally but moment by moment. I'm coming to see that it was that conversation between Jesus and his father that shaped Jesus' entire ministry. Miracles and brilliant teachings flowed out of that quiet, ongoing conversation. Such power can similarly flow from your life and my life as well.