

## DADDY

To learn and to pray the Lord's Prayer means you have chosen Jesus as your Teacher, your Master – the One under whose discipline you have chosen to live, and to learn what life is about, what it means, and how to go about it. The Lord's Prayer is a prayer, and embodied in this prayer are the steps, the attitudes, the desires a disciple must "take on" to walk the Christian Way. We are not talking about perfection here. We are talking about a WAY of Life – a pilgrimage, a journey.

That is a too-brief summary of where our study of the Lord's Prayer has taken us so far. Then we ran into the language barrier and into a constant requirement: Each of us must constantly be translating the language of Scripture from earthbound words to inner truth – from mundane to spiritual understanding.

For example: "*The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls ....*" (Matthew 13:45) This passage does not mean we should all become jewelers, does it? You must jump from the outer words to a greater inner meaning, or you miss it. You will become a jeweler but will always wonder, "Why am I doing this? I don't even like pearls that much." Or when Jesus says, "*The kingdom of heaven is like leaven which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal, until it was all leavened.*" (Matthew 13:33) Do you then go home, hide leaven in three measures of meal, bake bread, and say, "There, I guess I took care of that. Now I have fulfilled the kingdom"?

So we each must be constantly translating. Then we need to talk about our experiences and understandings with each other, because that is one of the major checkpoints we are given. Nobody walks the Christian Path alone. It still is not precision; nobody is ever "right" with religion like we can be with mathematics. When we try to share with each other what inner meanings we are finding, Heaven knows if we ever really "hear" each other. But it's okay because the secret is not in being precise or in getting all the words right. The secret of religion is to learn to trust God.

On the other hand, in Christendom we need each other to constantly ground our spiritual precepts. If people start flapping their arms and soaring too high into mere theory or imagination, we ask: Where are you getting that? Are you just making that up? How is that

attached to and how does it square with what we know of actual “messengers,” especially Jesus – born of the flesh, one of us, yet sent from God? But as mentioned, we are not literalists. Words are only symbols. Words are never perfect, and they are especially imperfect when used for spiritual purposes. That is, the heart and the soul can use mundane words to leap toward that which the words seek in vain to reveal, but the words themselves are never technically (or spiritually) right or accurate. Son of God? That’s poetry! If you go to biology, you are talking gibberish. Son of the numinous, omniscient, nameless One? What does that mean? I totally believe it – but in complete humility, and knowing that it is mystery beyond my comprehension.

Yet some people were offended because last week I said that we have to “translate” the words of the Lord’s Prayer inside our own soul, and seek their higher meaning within a heart that truly longs to pray as Jesus intended us to. They came to me and basically said, “Why tamper with the words? If they are good enough for Jesus – if these are the words Jesus gave us – then why don’t we just accept it and take the words as they are given? Let’s not be so smart all the time and keep changing the meanings, lest we lose them.”

That is a beautiful and important point. We are disciples. We are under discipline. We are supposed to be trusting and humble and teachable and obedient to our Master – and, with willing hearts, do all that we can perceive or comprehend of what He is asking of us. This church has not always had that kind of attitude, and it is becoming a true church as quickly as its genuine humility and faithfulness grow. With that attitude, I can hardly wait until the season brings us back to themes like tithing (some of you get enormously nonliteralist when we get to that!) or the requirement to forgive (even your pastor).

But back to the issue of translating, which seemed to bother some folks. The Scripture passage read: *When you pray, say: “Father.”* I suggested we all have to translate the word “Father” into the inside meanings Jesus was pointing to. “No, no,” some said. “We must accept it just as Jesus gave it.” How many of you speak Aramaic? You want it like Jesus said it, with no translation? How many of you promise to attend if we hire a person to come teach us Hebrew and Aramaic? Even if we did, we would be trying to learn by comparing strange words in Aramaic to English words we know. You see? If we are not translating all the time, we are understanding and comprehending nothing. Our tradition has always insisted that “the Word of God” is “a Living Word.” If we lock it down to preset shapes so that we can feel

secure and safe in our truth, then it cannot teach us anymore. Then it has become ritual, form, creed – and we have killed it. It is no longer the Word of God.

Once upon a time, at a summer camp in the 1940s, a young boy was leaping over a log and drove a spike deep into his foot. By the next morning, he could not walk. But the camp was a week long, so he sat alone while the rest of the camp was alive with activities. That was okay; he was used to being alone. Then one of the camp staff took interest in him. He was a big man, a lumberman, with huge hands and calluses as tough as shoe leather. He threw the young boy over his shoulder as easily as a normal person would pick up a kitten, and he carried him everywhere, even on all the hikes.

The man – Nathan was his name – was not much of a talker. He loved to move, to be in action, and mostly he tried to *show* what he wanted to say. Then one night at the campfire meeting, he seemed to get annoyed at the program. It was too canned, too dull, too pat, too boring. He shifted and squirmed on his seat, and the boy beside him wondered what was wrong and watched his troubled face. Finally the man strode forward to the bonfire, stooped, then scooped out a large, red-hot coal with his bare hands. Turning toward the group, he juggled the coal, blowing on it in his hands, tossing the coal from hand to hand. After a while, he told the group his thoughts.

The coal, he said, is very beautiful. It also gives off heat, warmth, and light. He said the coal is like the Word of God. It is beautiful and has such power to heat and illuminate, to warm and inspire. But humans cannot stand it in full strength. It will burn them; anything with real power is dangerous. Yet it is too beautiful to leave alone. So they must always juggle it. And if whenever humans take a little piece of this fire out of its context and play with it for long enough, it will eventually get tame and safe. It will turn from fire to ash. “When you can hold it still in your hand and it does not burn you anymore, it is no longer the Word of God,” he said. Holding the now-black coal steady in his hand, he looked straight at me and said, “Do not forget.” Then he sat back down beside me. And I still try not to forget.

*When you pray, say: “Father.” (blow, juggle, blow)*

Some of you who have not had good fathers may too quickly assume that it is easy for those of us who have had essentially wonderful fathers and who find ourselves male, at least this time around. I agree that is much to be grateful for. But this too must be

translated, and the danger is that sometimes we do not realize it. God is not just an overgrown manifestation of our good fathers! It is too easy to transfer individual characteristics and even personality flaws onto the relationship we have with the numinous, loving Being that Christ is directing us toward. Comfortable traps can be as deadly as wicked ones. They are sometimes even worse, because we do not struggle to get out of them.

Some of you are realizing by now that you are getting the same sermon today that you got last Sunday. Don't fret; if we get this first word right, the rest will come easy. None of us ever gets and keeps it clear enough. And we had the long, if necessary, interruption about sexist language. So it is not your fault that you did not fully "catch it" last Sunday. This prayer holds power and magic, and it begins full force with the very first word. *When you pray, say: "Father."*

Okay, for those who do not like translations, let's go back. *Abi* means "my father." It is the more formal, more polite, more respectful form of "father." ("James, I'm going to put you in charge of the sheep this month. Find the flock tomorrow at first light and send Aaron back here to me." "Yes, my father – yes, *Abi*.") Nothing wrong with *Abi*. Some modern fathers I know could use a lot more of it. But it is more formal, respectful, emotionally distant.

*Abinu* means "our father." This is also formal and even less intimate than *Abi*. Traditional Jewish prayers in Jesus' day began with *Abinu*, and they almost invariably included the phrase "in heaven." It would appear that Matthew reverts to the more familiar, more traditional, safer form: *Abinu* – "Our Father, who art in heaven." That is what we are used to in English.

So from the very beginning, we have only *translations* of Jesus' words. The New Testament was not written in Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke; it was written in Greek. And here is a word that the followers were so stunned by that they not only remembered it, they harked back to the Aramaic even in Greek texts. It is as if the freshness and the audacity of Jesus were too much, too stark, too surprising and upsetting to leave the word in Greek. But (and some of you will say "of course") I am trying to persuade you to get your meaning from Luke.

*When you pray, say: "Abba." Not Abi. Not Abinu. Say: "Abba."* What does *Abba* mean? Instead of a definition – or rather, as a definition – get a picture in your mind. The picture is of a child, age four or five. The child is running, arms outstretched. A look of pure delight is on the child's face. There is a man coming toward the child. His face is beaming too and his arms are open wide. The child's voice is filled with affection and expectation and a lot of things that will never ever quite fit into words. And as the child is running toward this man, the child is calling "*Abba! Abba! – Daddy! Daddy!*" That picture is the definition of *Abba*.

Jesus taught us: *When you pray, say: "Abba." Not Abi. Not Abinu. Say: "Abba."* Are you getting it? This is a step we have to take, if we are Jesus' people. This is a motion, an act, a leap of faith. Nobody had ever dared to address God with this sort of intimate, childlike trust and affection – until Jesus shocked His world by giving this prayer to His disciples. *When you pray, say: [skip Abinu, cut behind it all, go straight to] "Abba."* You do not have to try to revert back to your childhood. You only have to realize that with God, you are as a little child. And you do have to remember the trust, the delight, the affection and love, the open arms, the running toward.

What do you think of when you think of Daddy? When you think of the picture we have used to define Daddy? By the way, I did not cheat with that definition. And I did read to you a couple of passages that show how early Christians (via Paul) were indeed meditating out of this Lord's Prayer and were still stunned, however gratefully and happily, to be realizing what Jesus had suggested was their proper relationship with God.

But what do *you* think of, on the simplest levels, when you think of Daddy? Normally, Daddy is God to a young child. Daddy provides, protects, plays, tests, teases, disciplines, hugs, loves. Daddy is often full of surprises, and you can never tell when Daddy will bring a gift. Daddy is The Rules, Daddy makes it work, Daddy is sometimes stern – and precisely for these reasons, Daddy is what makes this big, scary world feel safe. Do you remember? What a feeling! When Daddy came home, all the wrongs would be righted – and maybe some of that would be hard, if you were attached to some of them. But afterwards it would be all right and it would be safe again. If Daddy was close, then bogeymen or tigers or whatever – nothing was very scary if Daddy was near. Except Daddy himself, if you got too far out of line. ("*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.*")

I even remember, when I was old enough to know better, watching my father walking along the street below. I was seven stories up, in his office, looking out the window. He was coming down the far side of the street, back toward his office. It was the center of downtown Long Beach, California (Jergins Trust Building, to be exact). He had to cross the Pacific Coast Highway there at Pine. He got to the crosswalk and stepped right out into the oncoming traffic. The cars were heading right toward him. From up where I was, I could not see that the traffic light had changed. I remember thinking, “Oh no! I hope that car doesn’t hit him!” I was not worried about my father; for just that split second, I knew that if the car hit him, it would split the car in two! I hoped the car would stop in time because I did not want the people in the car to be hurt. *Nothing* could hurt *Abba!*

Why am I telling you this? Translate it somehow, some way, until you get into the meaning of this prayer. I seem to know lots of people who do not have near as much regard for, as much faith in, as much trust in, or as much affection and respect and love for GOD as I have for my earthly father. Taking trips with Jesus, trying to follow Him, is wonderful – the most exciting thing in the world – but not if you do not know how to call God *Abba*. That is part of the survival pack. Actually, that is the first item on the list. Fooling around with Jesus if we do not know God as *Abba* is incredibly dangerous. Then we are dead meat, or dead spirit, or both.

Are you getting it this time? It does not matter how rich or famous or prominent or successful we are. It does not matter how worried, scared, defeated, or ashamed we are. It is our relationship with God that changes and redeems everything. *When you pray, every time you pray, say: “Abba!”* (Daddy! Daddy!)

If this is not the way we come to God, then maybe we have never truly prayed yet. Or maybe we have been praying to the wrong god, if we do not come this way. Or maybe if we *cannot* come this way, we are not yet ready to pray. Or maybe delighting to come into God’s presence in this way is more important than all of the other things we say or hear or do.

One thing we do know: A man who had the spiritual power to calm storms, transform lives, make the lame to walk, give sight to the blind – and before it was done, a man who changed the face of life itself by obeying His God through and despite everything this world could do to stop Him – this man, when He prayed, went as a child, saying: *Abba*. If you follow Him, you will too.