

2018 05 20 – Our Father in Heaven

Acts 2:1-21

“Our Father, who art in heaven”

We say those words nearly every Sunday. They are the first words of a prayer that is prayed every day by Christians all over the world. It is a prayer that is known by several names. Do you know what they are? (*wait for a response: Lord’s Prayer, Our Father, Prayer of Jesus, Kingdom Prayer,*).

Over the next few months I will be preaching a series of sermons on the Lord’s Prayer. Today is the first of that series. So let’s begin at the beginning. Does anyone know where this prayer comes from? (*Matthew 6:9-13 - the middle of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, Luke 11:2-4*) The version in Luke is actually a little shorter. In fact, it shortens the opening phrase, “Our Father who art in heaven” to just “Father.” So the first thing we should note is that there is no one definitive version of this prayer. The second thing to be aware of is that the Lord’s Prayer that we said earlier this morning doesn’t exactly match either of the versions in the New Testament. It comes from the Church of England’s Book of Common Prayer and was originally composed in 1662. The exact version that we use most Sundays can be found in the Book of Common Prayer of 1928 and The United Church Hymnary of 1930. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lord%27s_Prayer

Here’s another interesting question. How many English versions of the Lord’s Prayer do we have in our hymn book, in Voices United? There are actually four. Three are close translations and one is a paraphrase. Those of you who

watched Harry and Meghan get married yesterday may have noticed that they used a slightly updated version of the Lord's Prayer that is very close to the ecumenical version found on page 921 in our hymn book. Just to give you a "head's-up," as we go through this sermon series over the next couple of months, we will also be praying different versions of the Prayer of Jesus so that we can appreciate all of the ways that it can be translated and interpreted. The words that I will be focussing on during my sermons are the ones that we find in the gospel of Matthew.

In the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, the Matthew prayer begins with the phrase, "Our Father in heaven." Obviously this phrase refers to God, to the Holy Mystery, the Ground of our Being, the Essence of Love. In the prayer we refer to God as Father. We know the sacred is beyond our comprehension and therefore any name or description that we may have for the divine can only be metaphorical. And when I say only, I don't mean to diminish the power of metaphor. As Dominic Crossan, a distinguished biblical scholar wrote, "tread carefully here, because metaphors create dreams and symbols create visions" (The Greatest Prayer, Pg 10).

There are many metaphors that we can use for God. Probably each of us has our own favourite names and images for the sacred. What are some of the ones that you prefer? (*wait for responses*) Jesus used the word "Father" for God. In fact, often he used the word, "Abba" which translates to "Daddy." Jesus lived in a patriarchal world where the father was nearly always the head of the household and the head of the household was seen as the provider, the protector, the model

for their way of being, and in some ways even as creator. So God was understood as the ultimate householder – the householder of the world. This was the image of God that Jesus’ disciples would have known and grown to love. According to Jewish custom, this householder, this father figure didn’t live on earth. Two thousand years ago people believed that the earth was flat and above the earth was a dome they called sky and above that dome was heaven. This was where God lived – way above the clouds. So when Jesus prayed to the sacred it was to “Our Father, in heaven.”

But this particular metaphor for God is no longer sufficient for most of us in the 21st century. In fact, it wasn’t really sufficient for Jesus and his disciples either. That is obvious from today’s scripture reading in Chapter Two of the Acts of the Apostles..

After Jesus died, his disciples (or apostles) were living in Jerusalem trying to figure what they were going to do next. They had taken a first step of choosing another disciple to take Judas Iscariot’s place among the twelve. But they were missing the guidance and the support of their teacher, their rabbi.

And then Pentecost came. Pentecost was the spring harvest festival that happened every year exactly 50 days after the Passover. Like the Passover, it was a time for people to gather in Jerusalem. Pilgrims came from all over the Middle East. coming to celebrate and to worship at the temple. The apostles “were all together in one place. And suddenly, from heaven there came wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire,

appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit gave them ability.” The disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit. When people heard them they were amazed and some thought they were drunk. But Peter said no, they were instead fulfilling a prophecy from the book of Joel.

God came to them, not as a man, a father figure, but as wind and fire. The Holy Spirit came and filled them with energy and love and the ability to do things that they had previously been unable to do. It is that Spirit of Love, that energizing transforming power of the Holy Spirit that is able to change us too. This is the God that I believe in: a Holy Mystery that is able to fill me when I am empty, encourage me when I am discouraged, strengthen me when I am weak, and comfort me when I am lost, a Spirit of Love that dwells not in heaven, but in me and in every other part of creation.

The scripture goes on to say that Peter continued preaching about Jesus and about the gift of the Holy Spirit. The people who were there were so amazed by his words and by the gifts of the apostles that they asked to be baptized. Their fledgling community quickly grew to three thousand people.

When I pray “Our father, in heaven,” I don’t picture a bearded white guy sitting on a throne or even a gentle mother, sitting in a rocking chair. Instead I focus on the breath within my own body and imagine the sacred within me. Next time we pray the Prayer of Jesus I invite you to fill your heart with your own favourite image of God.