

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“The Lord’s Prayer: Our Father in Heaven”
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Exodus 4:21-23; Matthew 6:9-13

He was 19 years old and his mother had just died and his locked bedroom door burst open. Standing in the doorway was his inebriated father holding a butcher knife. He leaped out of his bed just as his father plunged the knife into the mattress. As he later described it, he fought as hard as he had ever fought. He fought for his life. Finally, after injuring his father enough to escape, he walked out of his house with only the clothes he had on; a t-shirt, gym shorts and tennis shoes. Meat, that was his friends called him, would never go home again. He had finally had enough of his father’s alcoholism and violence.

I offer this brief snippet into the life of Meatloaf (yes for those of you who don’t know the singer, Meatloaf, that is his name) because it reminds us of the baggage that is often carried with the word “father.” Father’s come in all sorts and sizes. For some of us we may have had a father who was a Ward Cleaver type; thoughtful, kind and forgiving. Others of us may have had a father who was distant, remote and inaccessible. Others may have had an absent father, or a father like Meatloaf’s. Some of us may not have had a father at all. My point in discussing this baggage is that studies have shown that people associate the attributes of their fathers with God. If their father was kind, so is God. If their father was stern and unloving, so is God. Granted, sometimes people can set aside their own father’s influence and imagine a perfect father; one who fits what they hope and dream that their father might be, and assign those attributes to God. But these are constructs we bring to God as father. They are not the scriptures speaking to us about what they mean, about what Jesus might mean, when he prays this prayer to the Father. If we are to pray this prayer as Jesus taught, perhaps the place we ought to begin is to try to understand what a first century Jew would understand the Father to be. And I would argue the two attributes of Father they would bring to the table were Liberator and Law Giver.

The Father liberates. The Father sets free. One night years ago, at probably one in the morning, our phone rang, bringing Cindy and me out of a deep sleep. The voice on the other end was our son Andy. He said he needed my help. He told me where he was, so I got dressed, hopped in the car and headed to his location. It turned out that he and his then girlfriend had gone four-wheeling in a two-wheel jeep and had gotten themselves stuck between two massive ruts. My task as dad, was to liberate them by calling and paying for a tow truck. This image of God as liberator is perhaps the most ancient revelation of the God of the Hebrews as Father, and can be found in the Exodus passage we read this morning. It is in this passage that God first refers to the Hebrew people as God’s own children and as God’s first born. The story centers around the reality that the people were stuck, they were enslaved. God sends Moses to unstuck them; to liberate them. Moses is to tell Pharaoh that he is to set free not just a random people, but God’s people. This is what Father’s do. They act to liberate their offspring from those people and powers that oppress them. If we were to follow this theme throughout the rest of the Old Testament, we would

watch as God liberates the people from the Philistines, the Egyptians, the Assyrians and the Babylonians. So when Jesus prays to the Father, he is praying to the one who liberates to give life.

The Father leads. Let me ask you this morning, how many of you had parents? How many of you had parents who tried to teach you the difference between right and wrong? Who tried to teach you what it meant to be a good person? Who put limits on you to keep you safe? Who set down rules and boundaries to help you understand what were appropriate and inappropriate actions and behaviors? Who tried to lead you to becoming the best people you could be? If you had a parent like this, then you understand the second part of what Jesus and his listeners would conceive of as Father; the one who leads them to life and who does so by giving them the law. I realize that often when we speak of someone giving the law we might think of someone who is “laying down the law”, who is angry and is moving toward discipline or punishment. But Judaism understood the Law not as punishment, but as gift. The Law that Moses was given by God to give to the people was intended to lead people to life. It was to encourage appropriate behavior, discourage inappropriate behavior and give the people of God a clear understanding of how life could be fully lived and love of God and neighbor embraced. While not all the 613 rules were clearly understood, such as why you could not eat meat and milk together or eat pork, meaning in Israel we could not get a bacon cheese burger, most were clearly understood as offering positive guidance to create a community of love and service. So, when Jesus prays to the Father, he is praying to the one who leads to give life.

What is fascinating to me about this image of the Father to whom Jesus teaches his disciples to pray, is that Jesus, as the son, carries out the same two functions. It is like father like son. Jesus liberates and Jesus leads. Jesus liberates people from hunger, fear, loneliness, possession, hatred, prejudice and ultimately the power of sin itself by his death on the cross. He liberates human beings to be the people God always intended them to be. And in so doing he carries out the work of the Father in all that he does. Though the liberation he offers is not what many looked for, it is the only kind of liberation that allows for the transformation of individuals, communities and the world. Jesus also leads. While Jesus leads by offering a fresh take on the Law of Moses...and by the way often a more difficult interpretation...such as Moses said you shall not kill, but also that you shall not hate. At the same time Jesus leads by personal example. Jesus demonstrates and teaches to his followers what the God centered life looks like. It looks like compassion for all persons. It looks like forgiveness for all. It looks like non-violence. It looks like a life of sacrificial living. It looks like the kind of life that the Law itself calls us to live.

The challenge for us then is three-fold. First it is to rethink what Jesus means by Father; that it is not our preconceived notion of father, or daddy, but that Father is the one who liberates and leads. Second, it is to allow those two ideas to shape our understanding of who God is and what God is doing for us; that God is both liberating us from what holds us back and leading us into becoming whole. Finally, it is to allow those two ideas to shape how we understand the rest of the prayer, by asking that God fulfill those two roles.

My challenge to you then is this, during this week as you pray the Lord's Prayer, to ask yourself, how am I seeing God anew, in such a way, that I might be more fully led into the fullness of life?