

Our Father
Exodus 17:1-7
September 28, 2008

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts ...

Our Father in heaven, may we honor you above everything else. May the world become what you want it to be. May we do what you want us to do. Day by day give us what we need. And forgive our sins ...

Our Father ...

Our father ...

Preposterous! "Our father." What an utterly preposterous thing to say! You don't think so? Were you paying close attention last week?

We believe in you, O God, eternal spirit ...

We profess belief in a God who is eternal spirit, something -- someone -- entirely different from us, wholly other, someone not bounded as we are by the constraints of time and space.

We live 70, 80, 90 years, and we think that's a long time! Just try thinking of time in geological terms or astronomical terms. When you try to make sense of millions or billions of years it makes you head hurt! But as far back as you can go, God was there before.

And as far out as you can go, God was there already. We are bound by our bodies. We live and move in one particular place. We see everything there is to see from one particular perspective. But God is spirit. God can't be "contained" in any one place. God can't be pinned down to any one place to be examined or studied or understood.

God is beyond us, outside us, out of our reach, beyond our perception, beyond our comprehension, even beyond our imagination. There is so much difference, so much distance, between God and us. The only proper response to the One who is wholly other, eternal spirit, holy God, is awe and wonder and even fear (the Israelites believed a person could not see God and live), trembling, humility, admitting our ignorance. God is unapproachable majesty! God is unfathomable mystery! God is unimagined glory! So to say of this Holy One, this wholly other One, "That's our Dad!," is preposterous!

But that's what Jesus told us to say.

When Jesus addressed God as Father, it was something entirely new. The Hebrew people had not spoken of God in those terms before. Jesus spoke of God as his father, tying his own self-identity very much to this sense of a special and personal relationship with the living God. Talking in that way got Jesus into a lot of trouble -- how presumptuous! how preposterous! how blasphemous! -- but he didn't talk that way to presume or to boast, but to tell people something important about who God is

and to invite people into that same kind of intimate relationship with the God who is. When he invites his followers to address God in the same way -- *our father* -- he expects that they too, that we too, can enjoy the same sort of special and personal relationship with God he does.

Jesus invites us to think of God as our father ...

... a father who provides for his children, making sure they are well-fed and well-sheltered, that they have opportunity to learn and to play, to develop their talents and test their strengths and work on their weaknesses.

... a father who protects his children from anything and anyone who might threaten their safety or well-being.

... a father who disciplines his children, wanting them to be spared the tragic results of weak will or poor character.

... a father who loves his children as they are, but dreams of what they might become, of what they can become, who points them in that direction, but will not do it for them.

... a father who comforts their hurts and calms their fears and forgives their mistakes, even their sins, because a father does not give up on his children!

... a father who does not wish misery for his children, but joy, so he forgives them and lifts them up and sets them on their feet and points them forward once again

... a father who never stops hoping for his children and never lets them lose hope.

... a father who is prepared to give ... Well, what will a father give, what will a father give up, for the children he loves?

The people of Israel were in the wilderness, some miles and some months removed from the place of their slavery in Egypt, and they were thirsty. You who are fathers! What do you do when your children are thirsty? You give them a drink!

What do you do when your children are whining and complaining and can only see what is right here and right now, can't see the end of the road, can't see the light at the end of the tunnel, can't see the goal, can't see the big picture? You don't lecture them and try to make them see what they can't see. That would only frustrate them and make things worse. You address their immediate needs and try to keep them moving.

What do you do when your children doubt you, when they are angry and ungrateful, when they test you? Could you do what this Father did?

I will stand before you on a rock at Mount Sinai. Strike the rock and water will come out of it for the people to drink ...

Strike the rock ... I remember years ago hearing a seminary president, Ed Clowney, preach this text at Cedar Campus in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. His description of the scene astonished me.

God is being tested, tried, accused by the people. The scene is a courtroom scene. God, the accused, takes the stand, on the rock, before the leaders of Israel, the people's representatives, receiving their accusations and bearing their judgment! When the rock is struck, it is God, the God "standing" on the rock, who takes the blow! And what results? Water flows from the rock for the thirsty people to drink!

This is the kind of father God is, the father Jesus knows and wants us to know: a father who puts the welfare of his children first, who does not forget where they are going, where they must go if they are to survive and to thrive, where he wills them to go ... a father who will bear their complaints, a father who will bear their judgments, a father who will give up his right to be right, to save them.

But, most of all, when Jesus invites us to think of God as our father, he invites us to believe in a God to whom we are connected in the most intimate and lasting of ways. A father never stops being a father. Fatherhood can't be undone or unmade or taken back.

When we believe in God, God is our father. When we do not believe in God, God is our father.

When we praise God, God is our father. When we throw our complaints at God, God is our father.

When we make God proud, God is our father. When we let God down or even fail God, God is still our father.

An eternal spirit invites awe and wonder and even fear, and God is eternal spirit, but a father invites gratitude and loyalty and love, and God is our father.

We believe in you, O God, Eternal Spirit, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and our Father ...

Actually, if you find the Statement of Faith of the United Church of Christ in the back of your hymnal, that's not how it reads! It reads ...

We believe in you, O God, Eternal Spirit, God of our Savior Jesus Christ and our God ...

The Statement of Faith we have in our hymnals and the Statement of Faith we use in worship and in our confirmation classes is titled: "United Church of Christ Statement of Faith in the Form of a Doxology." It is a revision of the original Statement of Faith, a revision intended primarily to avoid the pitfalls of exclusive and oppressive language.

It is a brilliant revision! By addressing God directly in the form of an act of praise instead of stating what we believe about God in the form of a creed, it avoids the problem of referring to God as if God were either male or female, either he or she. It addresses God as you!

The problem of gender-specific language is that it may exclude. When we speak of God as him, we may make women feel as if God is "other" than them. Which, of course, is true, because God is other than all of us!

But the revision succeeds not only in getting rid of gender-specific language, but also and especially in transforming the whole tone of the Statement into an intimate and personal expression of praise to God. Listen to the difference ...

The original version:

We believe in God, the Eternal Spirit ... and to his deeds we testify: he calls the worlds into being, creates man in his own image ...

The revision:

We believe in you, O God, Eternal Spirit ... and to your deeds we testify: you call the worlds into being, create persons in your own image ...

In my mind there is no comparison in power and intimacy and meaningfulness between the two.

But when the third phrase of the Statement of Faith was revised, something was lost. Something vital was lost. *God of our Savior Jesus Christ and our God?* Or, *Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and our Father?* The two simply do not say the same thing! It is comforting to think of God as our God, because God is first of all Jesus' God, but it is another and most wonderful thing altogether to think of God as our Father, because God is first of all Jesus' Father.

What would it mean to you, if you were to think, if you were to believe, that God is our father, your father?

What would it mean to you if the image of God in your mind and heart were not that of a stern judge waiting to pounce on your every mistake, but of a loving father firmly, gently, patiently, hopefully correcting, redirecting, restoring?

What would it mean to you if the image of God in your mind and heart were not that of a unbending icon of moral righteousness, but of a father bending and giving and seeking and responding, all for your sake, all for your good, all to lead you into the joys of a righteous life?

What would it mean to you if the image of God in your mind and heart were not that only of an unfathomable mystery, an indecipherable spirit, creating and controlling everything that is, but of a father who cares about the cut on your finger and the ache in your heart and the worries that will not let you be?

Would you be grateful? Would you be hopeful? Would you want nothing more than to love that God back?

Today, September 28, is my father's birthday. I am forever grateful for my father, and grateful to my father, for the precious gifts he gave me: gifts of wisdom, of thoughtfulness, of appreciation for the raw beauties of this earth, gifts of a love for learning, of a love for God.

But to think that I may call God my Father, that we may call God our Father ...