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 First Presbyterian Church of Athens
 12th Sunday of Ordinary Time
 Fathers' Day, June 19, 2016
 Text: Matthew 6:7-13

Our Father

Introduction to Scripture

Our Old Testament reading from near the end of Deuteronomy is the first part of a text called "The Song of Moses." In this section, Moses is unhappy with the people's unfaithfulness. He addresses them first in the second person and then speaks of them in the third person. Note the several images Moses uses for God in this passage: a rock, an eagle, and (the one we are most interested in today) a father. Listen for God's word: *Deuteronomy 32:3-6, 11-15*.

Today we are beginning a close look at the Lord's Prayer. I'll be preaching a series of sermons on this most famous and important prayer. The Lord's Prayer is found in two places in the Bible—in Luke and in Matthew. Matthew's version is more like what we recite in church, and that is what we will hear today. You'll probably notice that in the New Revised Standard Version the antiquated pronoun "thy" is rendered in modern English as "your." The prayer is set in the context of the Sermon on the Mount in a section about prayer. Listen again for God's word: *Matthew 6:7-13*.

Sermon

The Lord's Prayer is something we pray together every Sunday. It rolls off your tongue with ease, unless, of course you are the one standing at the pulpit leading it. Not a pastor I know hasn't at some point mixed up the words, me included. That's why I keep page 16 in the front of the hymnal handy when we get to that point in the service.

We recite the Lord's Prayer every Sunday, and I hope it is on your lips throughout the week. It is so familiar that you could say that we pray it out of habit. While habits may get a reputation for being boring or stuffy, I'd like to say that the habit of praying the Lord's Prayer is a very good habit for several reasons.

First, it gives us something to say to God. We don't have to scratch around wondering what we should pray about. It's a ready-made prayer from Jesus himself which, in a few words, covers a tremendous amount of ground. It never wears out. We can dig deeper and deeper in the ground it covers our whole lives and never reach the bottom. So the Lord's Prayer is a good recipe, if you will, which gives us simple yet deep words to say to God.

Also, the Lord's Prayer is something we share with others. It may be the only thing that churches of all stripes have in common. Whether you go to a Roman Catholic mass or a storefront Pentecostal happening, you'll pray the Lord's Prayer. Praying this prayer is a reminder that we are part of something bigger than ourselves, something bigger than our congregation,

something bigger than our denomination, but a world wide body—the holy catholic church. So praying the Lord’s Prayer links us with other Christians.

Additionally, the habit of praying the Lord’s Prayer is a habit that shapes us. Every time we utter those words, it bends us toward God. It sanctifies us—that is, helps make us more Christlike, better disciples, holier people. Not because there’s any magic in our incantation, but because saying the words fights deeply rooted assumptions that we’ve picked up from our culture. Saying the words calls into question our own false ideas, prejudices, egos, and motivations. You shouldn’t pray this prayer if you don’t want to be challenged. You shouldn’t pray this prayer if you don’t want to be changed. Saying the Lord’s Prayer on a regular basis does a great deal toward shaping us to become the kind of people God desires. It’s a good habit to have.

So today we begin with the opening words of the Lord’s Prayer: Our Father, who art in heaven, or as the modern translations have it: Our Father in heaven. Seeing as how today is Fathers’ Day, fatherhood is perhaps already on our minds. Jesus instructs us to address God as our Father. “Father,” is, of course, a metaphor. Really, all our language about God is metaphorical. We compare God to, as we heard in Deuteronomy, say, a rock or an eagle or a father, understanding, of course, that God is not literally granite, feathered, or male—especially not male despite the Michelangelo frescoes and Gary Larson cartoons cemented in our brains. Father is an especially important metaphor and form of address as Jesus himself used it frequently when speaking about God or speaking to God. It wasn’t original with him. But it took on a great significance because of his frequent use of it. It’s also important because of his understanding of his (and consequently our) relationship with God. Father implies a particular relationship, a family relationship.

Fathers are related to their children either by biology or by adoption. But any way you look at it, the child doesn’t have any say in the matter. The child just belongs to the father. And that is true not only in earthly families but also in God’s family. We belong to God. We are claimed by God. Before we reached out to God, God reached out to us and promised to be our God. God has willed to be our God, and that is a given. Nothing we have done earns us the right to call God “Father.” The relationship is a gift.

At the outset of the Protestant Reformation, a catechism was written in Heidelberg, Germany. It quickly became widely used in Reformed churches in Holland and Hungary, as well as Germany. Dutch explorers brought it to the American colonies. Catechisms are tools for teaching the faith in a question-answer format. In the section on the Lord’s Prayer, the Heidelberg Catechism asks the question, “Why has Christ commanded us to address God: “Our Father”? The answer begins: “That at the very beginning of our prayer he may awaken in us the childlike reverence and trust toward God which should be the motivation of our prayer...”¹ So by addressing God as Father, Christ intends to awaken our childlike reverence and trust. Let’s look at those two attitudes which might have nodded off and need rousing.

First, childlike reverence. God is a father-like figure for us in the sense that God is bigger and more powerful than we are. Think of a small boy who literally must look up to his giant-sized dad. The boy slips his feet in dad’s shoes which are like two boats. The boy watches dad swing an axe which the boy can barely lift with all his might. The boy is in awe of his dad who is able to do feats which are totally out of the realm of possibility for him. When we pray, “Our Father,” we understand God to be greater than us, more powerful than us, a figure of authority. Adding the words, “in heaven” underlines the “otherness” of this Father. Speaking of God and heaven in the same breath is a way of talking about God’s transcendence, God’s holiness, God being of a totally

different order than us humans. God's power and authority are so vast and grand that we can do nothing but drop our jaws and drop to our knees in God's presence. This heavenly Father is Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth. So, we have a childlike reverence for God when we address God as "Our Father who art in heaven."

But secondly, as the catechism points out, not only is childlike reverence awakened in us when we pray the Lord's Prayer, but also childlike trust. A small child implicitly trusts her father. My very earliest memory is of my father and me in our backyard. He was tossing me into the air and catching me. It was an utter feeling of exhilaration. There wasn't a hint of fear. I had absolute trust that my dad would catch me. Years later when I was an adult and watched Jack toss our children in the air and catch them, I must confess that I didn't experience the same childlike trust. As each toss went higher and higher, and the gleeful laughs louder and louder, my dread grew greater and greater that he would drop them! But as children, we trust. Imagining God as our Father evokes confidence in God's goodness and reliability, God's love and forgiveness. Later in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says, "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!"ⁱⁱ God is like a father who gives us wonderful gifts like security and sustenance and is there for us through thick and thin. There's a sense of affection and intimacy, of childlike trust, when we address God as Father.

To recap: "Our Father who art in heaven" captures both the big, powerful, transcendent authority of God the Father as well as the loving, intimate, faithful goodness of God the Father. We both revere and trust this God like young children do their dads.

Let me add, however, that while many of us—most, I hope—had good earthly fathers, that is not universally the case. While addressing God as our heavenly Father may evoke positive vibes with many people, for others it sticks in the craw. For those whose biological fathers were absent, critical, abusive, or mentally ill, for example, the opening address in the Lord's Prayer awakens not childlike reverence and trust but childlike fear, hurt, and anger. In those cases, I might recommend borrowing the memory of someone else's dad, or imagining the ideal dad, or even putting yourself in Jesus' shoes. There's also the option of envisioning God as our mother, but that's another sermon.

So, we have reflected upon addressing God as Father. Let's turn now to that little word, "our." It's little but it packs a punch. It lets each of us know right off the bat that God is not my personal property. God is not my private deity. God is not a cosmic Amazon.com to fulfill my every wish. Nor is God a household deity who favors just my household, or just my nation, or just my religion. We cannot be possessive about God. God does not belong to us alone. The Father is "Our Father."

The little word "our" reminds us that we are not "only children." We share God with everybody else. Some folks don't want to accept that. A professor at a Christian college was forced out earlier this year because she said that Christians and Muslims worship the same God. Granted, different believers have different understandings, but we are monotheists. There is one God and Father of us all. God is the creator of all that is and has a whole host of children beyond us.

That fact has big implications. Because we belong to God's family, we cannot ignore God's other children. We cannot pray, "Our Father," and go on to dismiss the needs and cares of our siblings in the human family. Last Sunday 50 people were killed and another 53 were injured in the horrific attack on the Orlando gay night club. Tomorrow is World Refugee Day. Nearly 60 million people across the globe are displaced from home with thousands more fleeing each day.

Because there is one God who is the God and father of us all, we cannot live in isolation from others. We cannot tolerate hate, violence, discrimination, or injustice against any member of the human family. We are called love them all. We are called to extend compassion universally, to every child of our Father.

By the way, have you noticed? There aren't any first person *singular* pronouns in the Lord's Prayer. It's first person *plural*, (*our*, and *us*, and *we*) all the way through, beginning with Our Father.

So, praying the Lord's Prayer is a good habit to have. It's even better if we think about the words we are praying. The famous reformer Martin Luther had a dog. Whenever the Luthers sat down to supper that puppy waited attentively for a morsel from his master, eyes glued to Luther's every bite. Upon observing him, Martin Luther said, "Oh, if I could only pray the way this dog watches the meat! All his thoughts are concentrated on the piece of meat. Otherwise he has no thought, wish or hope."

Pray the Lord's Prayer with the focus of a dog waiting beside the supper table. Pray with total concentration on what it means to have childlike reverence and trust and with total attention to the operative little word, "our." Have no other thought, wish, or hope but what you are saying in this prayer.

"Our Father, who art in heaven," is how we begin.

i. The Heidelberg Catechism," Q &A #120, *The Book of Confessions*, (Louisville: Geneva Press, 1996), p. 79.

ii. Matthew 7:11