



Every time I read this passage it is jarring! The prayer we say each Sunday is derived from Matthew's gospel and it feels like Luke just got it wrong. The lack of phrases like, "*who art in heaven*", "*thy will be done*", and "*deliver us from evil*" leave us with the impression that Jesus was warming up until he got it right in Matthew's gospel.

From whichever version we pray, there is something monumental about this prayer. From His lips to the disciples' ears, to our mouths.

There is a real power to praying the same words Jesus used.

Try to place yourselves in the midst of those disciples. Imagine hearing them come from Him and saying them in concert with Him.

If you have ever been to a book reading by an author, you have a sense of this. I remember hearing Michel Stone read from her book *The Iguana Tree*. As she spoke of a migrant's struggle in America and the journey they took, the words took on a greater power than mere prose on a page. They came alive in my heart, my mind, and my soul; my empathy and my understanding multiplied. Getting them from her added depth and dimension, amplifying the text.

And yet, even as we pray "*Our Father*" we should not do so without examination and understanding.

Here is a short list of some controversial conclusions that have been drawn based on this choice of language:

- God is in fact male and based on this, men are superior.
- Jesus Himself was trapped in patriarchy, perpetuating masculine dominance.
- Jesus needed a true father figure (since Joseph is never mentioned outside the birth narratives) and so He projected His personal need onto God.

I cannot possibly tackle all of these conundrums but praying "*Our Father*" has indeed been problematic. In our day and age, it does lead children to conceive of God as a male. I saw this once again this past year in Children's Chapel for the Day School. When I asked how many thought God was female, the children looked confused and one or two timidly raised their hand. When I asked how many thought God was male, scores of hands shot up without hesitation. The language we use does matter, so we need to be careful.

And the Bible is not exclusive in its language. Genesis chapter 1 tells us "*In the image of God he created them, male **and female**.*"

In Hosea 11, God is described as a mother, *“I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them.”*

Also in Hosea, God is likened to a fierce female bear, *“Like a bear robbed of her cubs, I will attack them and tear them asunder...”*

And in Deuteronomy 32:18, *“You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you; you forgot the God who gave you birth.”*

In the end God is neither male nor female but Spirit but the primary reason to continue to say, *“Father”* in this prayer is three-fold.

First, Jesus gave it to us. And we trust that He would not give us something that was not beneficial to our prayer lives and souls.

Praying to God as *“Father”* does capture something fundamental about the divine but has nothing to do with masculinity. Rather, it conceives of God not as some impersonal deity that simply represents power and holiness, but that God is parent, which has profound implications.

For example, that God is devoted to us and will care for us. Jesus makes this explicit a few verses after the Lord’s Prayer:

Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him! (Luke 11:11-13)

This was a radical conception in the history of the world. Many ancient religions believed humans were created to be slaves of the gods. That we were made to feed and house the gods. But to say that God is our parent discloses a divine more devoted to the prospering of humans than God’s own self.

Second, praying to God as Father not only indicates that God cares for us, but that we can know God, that we can reach out to God. Thus, we ask for daily bread in this prayer and God wants to give it to us. As parent, God finds joy and meaning in leading us to prosper.

Finally, calling God *“Father”* is the most powerful notion in the history of the world. We are part of the divine family through Jesus’ gift on the cross.

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son...so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God. (Galatians 4:4-7)

We know in this world that being a Rockefeller, or a Bush, or a Kennedy, or an Obama offers great benefits and advantages in this life. But being in God’s family – nothing offers more promise in all the universe.

And so, at one point Jesus no longer calls disciples servants, but friends.

When we pray *“Our Father”* it should be with almost giddy delight – that we have this privilege to not only call God Lord, or Holy One,

but to speak to God as part of the heavenly family opens all things to us.

When we pray the Lord's Prayer, we should pray them as if Jesus is whispering the words in our ears. But it is not only Jesus with us. For He taught it to His disciples and clearly they taught them to others.

There is an unbroken line of His followers reciting these words across the globe and through time that leads to our praying them today.

Christians martyred by Rome.

Farmers clasping hands before a long day's work in China.

Christians in the Congo defying King Leopold.

Cuban Christians whispering them together under Communist rule.

(for some of you) Your parents, your parents' parents, to who knows how many generations.

250 years ago members of Brick Church.

All of those prayers lead up to today.

So much has changed but the human spirit; it is the same.

So, we keep these words because they have endured.

Think about what has changed since Jesus uttered them. Massively multiplied capability to grow food, medicine that actually heals, we have reached into outer space. So much has changed, and needed to, but these words still speak to us with fresh power, and

they have stood the test of time and crises of the moment.

I will share with you once again a story I told some months ago, for it bears repeating.

Active shooters on college campuses have become a plague in our country. And in the fall of 2018 a campus had gone on lock down. Shots were fired and at 11 p.m. The alert went to the students' phones, and they remained in place, turned out the lights, and listened for horror, terrified at what might happen.

More shots were reported, confusion abounded. One student called his father and they told each other about their love. The father checked the websites of the local news stations. They noted the active shooter status but nothing more. Over the next three hours they spoke briefly and texted. But not wanting to alert a possible shooter they kept their conversation to just a few words.

The young man's fear and dread continued to grow.

The minutes turned to hours and each little noise magnified his worry. So, the son turned to what he knew. He turned to what his church and his parents taught him. He turned to what he learned in Sunday School as a little boy. It was simple but beyond powerful.

My son, Matthew (my son!), closed his eyes, folded his hands, and said, "*Our father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name...*"

He recited the Lord's Prayer over, and over, and over again. And it gave him a measure of calm, some measure of peace. The good news is the whole situation was confused and the

students were never in danger. But they did not know that for 3 long hours until about 3 a.m.

Whether from Luke or Matthew, Jesus has given us a profound and powerful gift in this prayer, letting us know that God is a loving parent that both cares for us and wants to hear from us. And in praying them we connect ourselves to an unbroken line of spiritual power ready to support us no matter what we face, and ready to give voice to our joy, wherever we are. Amen.