

“Credo, Part Three, ‘Father’”:
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for September 15th (Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost)
by Foster Freed

Matthew 6: 5-14

And so we launched, last Sunday, into the “meat” of the Apostle’s Creed, with its far from matter-of-fact affirmation of God’s **reality** and yes, of God’s **singularity**: a singularity which—as I noted—very much links the Christian faith to the other two faith communities generally classified as the great “monotheistic” faiths. It was therefore entirely appropriate to make explicit reference to the most basic of Old Testament creeds, the one used daily by observant Jews: “Shema Yisroel, Adonai, Elohainu, Adonai, e’chod. “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One!” Nor, I hasten to add, would it have been inappropriate to reference the most basic of Islam’s creedal statements, known as the Shahada, which runs: “There is no God but God; Muhammad is the messenger of God.” Slightly more elaborate than Judaism’s creed...

...a creed which could incorporate the notion that “Moses is the prophet of God” but refrains from doing so...

...slightly more elaborate than the Shema with its mention of Muhammad, nevertheless: the Islamic creed—much like the Jewish creed—restricts itself to the notion of God’s singularity, God’s holiness. By contrast, Christianity—for its part—ended up following a very different course. Not only have we Christians been far more industrious in terms of the production of creeds and confessions of faith...but the affirmation of God’s singularity...

The Apostle’s Creed with its “I believe in God”...the Nicene Creed with its “We believe in one God”...the United Church of Canada’s New Creed with its “We believe in God...

...in each instance we prove ourselves incapable of stopping with those simple one-sentence declarations, declarations which—in terms of the Christian creedal enterprise—represent a mere opening salvo. Why that is so...and why (despite the fact that it has, at times, led us into some seemingly unproductive corners) we Christians seem quite incapable of following in the direction charted by Judaism and later echoed by Islam will, I think, start to become clear later this morning. But for now: for now let’s acknowledge that **our** creeds always wish to say more about God. In the case of the Apostle’s Creed, that first “something more” consists in the affirmation that this God—whose singularity we have already affirmed—is also to be regarded as “Father Almighty”: words which most certainly hang together...but words each of which...the word “Father” as well as the word “Almighty”, cry out for a wee bit of unpacking. And yes: in our era, that is especially true of the first of those words. The word “Father”...which—like it or not—has become problematic for us in countless ways.

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Let's begin...let's begin by noting that the word "Father" is no different than any other word of which we might make use when we use human language—our fragile human tongues—to say anything about God other than the most basic affirmation, namely that "God **is**." And frankly, even that teeny verb "is" can be inspected and dissected as soon as we ponder whether it quite the same thing to say that "**God is**", as it is to say, for instance, that "**Foster is**". But let's not go there this morning!!

Where we most certainly do need to go, this morning, is to acknowledge some of the very real issues and questions that tend to follow as soon as we think and speak in terms of the "fatherhood" of God. Note first that applying the language of "fatherhood" to God, immediately entails the understanding that the God we worship in this place is a "personal" God: a God able to relate to us in ways that are not unlike the way in which an earthly father relates to a child: at any rate in the way an earthly father ought to relate to a child. Note next that applying the language of "fatherhood" to God, also entails an understanding of God that incorporates a sense of divine "authority", not unlike the authority a "father" wields in a traditional family: especially true of the Jewish and Greco-Roman cultures—**patriarchal** cultures—that form the backdrop for the emergence of the Christian tradition. Finally note that applying the language of "fatherhood" to God also carries with it the unavoidable sense that there is something deeply "masculine" about the God we worship: a notion that has become especially problematic in the modern era. But please! Let's not make the mistake of presuming that it is only in our life-time that folks have struggled with questions and concerns with the naming of God as "Father". Deep-thinkers have long wrestled with the implication of referencing God with so personal a "name". Lovers of human autonomy—for their part— have long chafed under the allegedly oppressive authority of a divine Patriarch. Nor does one need to dig deeply into the history of Christian mysticism to find those—often but not exclusively women—who are far more attached (when push comes to shove) to the feminine realm of the Blessed Virgin than to the masculine realm of God the Father.

Again! I want to stress that none of this is new...and that there is no need to point fingers at modernity in general...or at feminist consciousness in particular. It has long been the case that folks have complicated relationships with their fathers...and, of course, with their mothers as well. And yes: those relationships really are complicated. The fact that more phone calls are made on Mother's Day than on Father's Day is telling. And yet: the fact that more *collect* calls are made on Father's Day than on Mother's Day...well, that's *also* telling.ⁱ Not sure too much should be read into either of those statistics. What surely cannot be denied, however, is the stark fact that a highly significant part of most of our growing-up years—leaving childhood behind and embracing adulthood—means learning to leave our parent's world and creating a world of our own. In the process we generally have no choice but to come to recognize that the pedestal on which most young children place their families needs to move down a notch or two. And yes: it can be painful to come to recognize—even in good and loving homes—that one's parents are no less flawed than any other human being. Indeed:

healthy human development demands that we eventually out-grow childish dependency on “father and mother”. Is it possible...is it possible that Christians ought to be able to out-grow their dependency on God the Father...at any rate....on a *language* that deploys the notion of God as Father?

Were it only that easy! Were it only that straightforward!

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To be truthful: I don't think there is anything problematic with the fact that Islam and Judaism are prepared to affirm the Oneness of God in their creeds, and then shut-up. Oh, to be certain, there is a great deal more both faith-communities might say and have said, about God, although they tend not to make those claims in formal creedal statements. What starts to define the Christian difference—beginning with our naming of God as Father—needs to be traced back to the role Jesus plays within the elaborate contours of Christian faith; his role in Christian piety has no real parallel in Judaism or in Islam. Needless to say, that unique role is spelled out fully in the very large second paragraph of the Apostle's Creed which speak of belief in “Jesus Christ our Lord.” We are far from arriving at that point in the Creed... and yet even here...even here in the Apostle Creed's first paragraph...**its fairly slender first paragraph**...the place of Jesus, the influence of Jesus...begins to assert itself: doing so with the entry into the Creed of the word “Father” as a name—perhaps as **the** name—for God.

And you may have noticed...may have noticed that two weeks ago when I launched this series by speaking of the Creed's opening words—“I Believe”—I chose to use a reading from one of the Psalms. Last week, in speaking of the word God, I chose to use a reading from the Old Testament book Exodus: an excerpt from the Ten Commandments, to be precise. Over the next few weeks, when I invite you to ponder with me words such as “Almighty”, “Creator”, “Heaven” and “Earth”, here again: all of our readings on those four Sundays will be drawn from the Old Testament. And yet!

And yet! This morning it somehow would have seemed entirely misguided to have stayed within the bounds of the Old Testament, in seeking to do justice to the word “Father” as a way of speaking of God. To be sure, I would have been able to offer at least two powerful Old Testament citations, both from the book of the prophet Isaiah. In one instance—drawn from the book's 63rd chapter—the prophet is heard to pray, plaintively asking God to *look down from heaven and see...for you are our Father/though Abraham does not know us and Israel does not acknowledge us, you O LORD are our Father, our Redeemer from of old is your name.*ⁱⁱ In a similar vein, in the very next chapter the prophet is heard to complain to God: *you have hidden your face from us and have made us melt in the hand of our iniquities, only immediately to remind God: But now, O LORD, you are our Father, we are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand.*ⁱⁱⁱ My point is simply this: it would be terribly misleading to claim that the notion of approaching God as Father originates with Jesus. Nevertheless!

There can be no disputing the fact that the **prominence** with which Jesus emphasizes the Fatherhood of God appears to be without parallel. That is certainly true of his teaching ministry: highlighted by the place of The Lord's Prayer—the Our Father—in two of the four Gospels. Here, in Matthew's presentation of the Sermon on the Mount, that prayer occupies pride of place: pretty much dead-centre in that great sermon's three-chapter flow. In Luke's Gospel it occupies a no less weighty place, offered in answer to a specific request from his disciples that he teach them how to pray; there, as in Matthew, the word "Father" serves as the key word in the prayer's address to God. Nor should we overlook what may well be the greatest of all his parables: that of the Prodigal Son which should really be known as the Parable of the Compassionate Father. Nor, for that matter, should we overlook the extent to which continual reference by Jesus to God as **his** Father in John's Gospel, finds a powerful echo in one of the most haunting passages of Matthew's, in which Jesus mysteriously assures his closest disciples: *All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.*^{iv}

What that passage, in particular, suggests goes well beyond Jesus "teaching" us to pray to God as "Our Father". What is hinted at there is the special intimacy with which Jesus prayed to—and walked with—the One to whom he turned not merely as "Our" Father but in some special sense as "his" Father. Nor is it irrelevant to this inquiry that there is good reason to presume that Jesus spoke to God not employing the formal word "father" but the intimate word "Abba:...papa!"

You see: beyond Jesus' explicit instruction to address our prayers to "Our Father", the New Testament as a whole leaves the unmistakable impression that Jesus—by doing so—is inviting us not merely to mouth words, but—far more profoundly—is inviting us to participate with him as he enters deeply into the special relationship—the special bond—between him and the One to whom he prayed as Father, as Abba, as papa. To put the matter sharply: it is far from incidental that the one we will come to name in the second paragraph of the Creed as "Jesus the Son", is the One who inducts us into the practice of calling on God as "Father". And yes...all of that...all of that makes it exceedingly tough for us as Christians simply to turn our back on the word "Father"...a way of naming God that predates even the most ancient of our creeds by a couple hundred years, since it is a practice that begins with Jesus himself, and the prayer with which he taught his disciples to pray!

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Well: there are no easy answers with which to adjudicate any of that in terms of our practice of prayer as we pray in this complex epoch in the history of the church; this complex epoch in the history of humanity. It's no secret that the Church's "Father" talk is viewed, by some, as endorsement of "patriarchy". Nor is it a secret that those who experienced a toxic relationship with their own earthly father, often struggle to pray to God as Father. While I admire those who are able to overcome that particular stumbling block by viewing prayer to God the Father as **liberation** from their bondage to

the awful human being they were taught to regard as their father, that approach won't be helpful to all who so struggle. These are real issues and concerns: that ought not to be swept under the rug.

In terms of personal piety, things are more straightforward, or so I have come to believe. For starters, I am put in mind of wise words from Thomas Merton, who counselled that we ought "to pray as we can/not as we can't". More directly of relevance here is a point made by Orthodox Bishop Anthony Bloom, who advises that if **any** word for God—even the most exalted of words for God—is getting in the way of our being able to pray, that we stop beating ourselves up, and simply find a better word. That's good advice, especially since the most important dimension of praying to God as "Father" is to be able to approach God with the same intimacy with which Jesus approached God. If the word "Father" is getting in the way, find another word.

Alas. Matters are—I think—more complex when we turn to our life of corporate prayer: in other words, the prayers we offer in this sanctuary. Turning to God as "Father", addressing our prayers to "Our Father", is a profound "marker" of what it means to participate in specifically Christian worship. And yet, addressing God as Father does not need to happen 23 times during a 60 minutes service of worship, in order to "prove" that we really are worshipping as Christians. Whether making use of alternative versions of the Lord's Prayer—versions such as the one we use periodically here at Trinity...or whether simply using varied language to name God in the prayers that lead up to our corporate recital of the more traditional version of the Our Father...surely there are ways in which we can make it clear that the tradition's use of Father-language for God is meant to emphasize not God's masculinity but God's desire to embrace us...

....to encourage, empower and equip us...

...in much the same way that the Prodigal's father—in that great parable—sought to encourage, empower and equip both of his sons, their own glaringly obvious failures and protestations and idiocies notwithstanding. You see:

Whichever words we use when we approach our God...surely they must be words that help us to catch a glimpse not only of God's singularity—God's holiness—but also to catch a glimpse of God's love...which, at a bare minimum, surely means catching a glimpse of God's **affection** for us: the realization that the God we worship doesn't merely put up with us, indeed, doesn't merely love us, but actually somehow manages also to like us. And yes: it is this our God who assures us!

I **was** there to hear your borning cry,
I **will be** there when you are old,
I **did** rejoice the day you were baptized,
and I **will be** watching every step of the way to see your life unfold.

Such is the One to whom Jesus turned when he prayed to “abba”. Such is the One to whom he invites us also to pray. The One who knows us...who cares deeply for us....who has promised to journey with us to the very end.

May it be so! Amen!

ⁱ <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/we-love-you-mdash-call-collect/>

ⁱⁱ Isaiah 63: 15,16

ⁱⁱⁱ Isaiah 65: 7,8

^{iv} Matthew 11: 27