



# Mount Carmel Lutheran Church

## *Abba*

Sermon by Pastor John Strommen

on Matthew 6:7-21

Sunday, February 3, 2019

On Friday night, I had the opportunity to go to Orchestra Hall for a symphony with my oldest son, Thomas, the saxophone player. We had dinner, enjoyed a great concert, ran into Thomas's cousin and her husband at the concert, and talked for quite a while after the concert. Then at one point, Thomas's roommate who was also at the concert, joined our little party. Thomas's roommate had given Thomas a ride there. We kept talking and eventually they had to kick us out of Orchestra Hall. The interesting thing was, when it was time to go home, I expected Thomas to just head back to his house with his roommate, since they were going to the same place, after all, in the Seward neighborhood. But he waived his roommate off. Even though it was the opposite direction for me leaving downtown, Thomas wanted me to take him home. OK, fine, Thomas. I guess I'll take the extra time navigating my way out of downtown to go east and double back again to the west.

But, you see, I didn't actually grumble much about this. I realized something rather lovely in this incident: Thomas just wanted to spend a few more minutes talking to his dad. No burning issue. Just time to be together.

Why do I tell you this? Because when Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he was essentially saying the same thing to them: prayer is personal. It's spending time talking to your father. "Our father in heaven," we are instructed to begin. But in fact, the term that gets translated as "father" in our text is the Hebrew word, "abba." And what made Jesus' teaching so interesting at the time was that the word *abba* was the word a child would use to address his or her father. It had a very intimate feeling, and as many biblical scholars have pointed out, the best translation of that word is really, "daddy."

Why is God our *father or daddy*? Well, Jesus often prayed to his father, and Jesus is here suggesting that we are Jesus' brothers and sisters, so God is our daddy, too. God loves us as his own children and wants to have a relationship with us, you know, where we talk.

And yet the very idea of prayer scares people – especially if they have to pray in front of someone else. For some reason, it's a performance that many feel they're not up to. Instead of just talking to your father, we have to talk different, real

religious-like, you know - all the things that prayer is not supposed to be: a performance, an inauthentic way of speaking. This is why Jesus cautions us in our text today not to use prayer to show off or manipulate God.

One of my favorite movie scenes about prayer is from “Meet the Parents.” Greg, played by Ben Stiller, is spending the weekend with his girlfriend and her parents, which is difficult enough for any guy, right? Well, his girlfriend’s father is played by Robert DeNiro, who’s kind of a direct, difficult person who works in intelligence and likes to test people. So, he tests Greg by asking him to say grace before they eat. Fortunately for Greg, he eventually remembers the words to a song he heard recently.

<film clip from “Meet the Parents”>

So, this is why people are afraid to pray. It’s exactly why in group situations pastors get used to the fact that we are the designated pray-ers. No one else wants to be put on the spot.

And yet, prayer, in its essence, is talking to your daddy. Bill Moyers, the journalist, was once a Baptist pastor and an assistant to Lyndon Johnson. Once, he was invited to the White House family room for dinner, and the president asked him to say grace. As Moyers prayed, the president couldn’t hear him very well and interrupted him, “Bill, speak up, I can’t hear you.” To which Moyers responded, “I’m not speaking to you, Mr. President.”

Score one for the personal, private nature of prayer!

Now, you might ask, “well, then, pastor, why do we pray in front of each other in worship?”

Well, public prayers have been part of our tradition from the very beginning of the Christian Church. Jesus’ point was to call out prayer as a way of propping oneself up or trying to manipulate God. Jesus sought to establish the personal and relational dimension of prayer, which can be practiced whether prayer is done corporately or privately.

OK, so it’s personal and all that, but why is it important to spend time talking to *Abba*? Thomas may want to talk to his dad from time to time, but he’s not dependent on me and Heidi. OK, he is dependent financially, but soon he won’t be!

*Abba* is how a child addresses his father, and a child is dependent. Yet Jesus is suggesting that we all – and we are mostly adults gathered this morning – that we all address God like we were a child speaking to his/her father. This was an eye-opener at that time Jesus taught the Lord’s prayer and it was quite intentional. No matter what age we are, no matter how self-sufficient we think we are in this world, Jesus is saying to us, “No you’re not self-sufficient. You’re as dependent on your father in heaven as a small child is on her parent. Even more so.”

Prayer is not a sign of weakness, you see, but a sign of humanity, acknowledging our dependence on God and our need before God. We are creatures who need our creator. So, prayer is an important practice – yes, it’s one of the core faith practices – because it draws us into a relationship of trust and dependence on our loving father in heaven.

And yet all of us forget this in life. We forget it a lot! That’s called sin, or brokenness. And all sin is separation from God. It’s thinking we can handle things on our own while we occasionally might need God for something – God as another version of Amazon.com?

But if we are separated from God we have a hunger to be made whole, to have our relationship to our *Abba* restored. This is why last week we talked about the beatitudes. They’re all about being poor in spirit and hungering for righteousness. The beatitudes open the door for us to reconnect with God, receive the kingdom of God, and be fully human. Prayer is taking action on the beatitudes in the same way as a child might say, “Daddy, I’m afraid. Hold my hand.” Or “Daddy, let’s play a game together.”

Prayer is not about what we ask for or say, necessarily. It’s time spent with our heavenly father that we need in order to be whole. We hunger for this, deep down.

Sarah Miles is a former atheist who is the director of the food pantry at St. Gregory’s Episcopal Church in San Francisco. She calls it the “Church of the One True Sack of Groceries.” As a journalist she covered the 1980’s wars in Central America up close where people were dying and later became an editor for the investigative magazine, *Mother Jones*. It was after that that she found herself walking into St. Gregory’s Church.

Here is how she describes her conversion,

*“I was just curious. I’m a reporter. I’m curious. I like to poke my nose in places, and I walked into this building thinking, ‘Huh, wonder what’s going on in there?’ I had wandered into a church that offers communion to everyone, including strangers. A woman put a piece of fresh bread in my hand and gave me a goblet of some rather nasty, sweet wine. I ate the bread and was completely thunderstruck by what I felt happening to me. So, I stood there crying, completely unsure of what was happening. I got out of the church as quickly as I could before some strange, creepy Christian would try to chat with me. And then I came back the next week because I was hungry, and kept coming back and kept coming back to take that bread. I think what I discovered in that moment when I put the bread in my mouth and was so blown away by the reality of Jesus was that the requirement for faith turned out not to be believing in a doctrine, or knowing how to behave in a church, or being the right kind of person, or being raised correctly, or repeating rituals. The requirement for faith*

*seemed to be hunger. It was the hunger that I had always had and willingness to be fed by something I didn't understand."*

If we go to God hungry for anything less than God, we may come away empty. But if we go hungry for God, we will come away with the deepest of all our hungers filled.

So, that is why Jesus tells us to pray, because, whether we fully perceive it or not, we are hungry for God. Like a child needs a father or mother, our first and most powerful prayer is simply to say, *Abba*, because it's all about the relationship. Amen.