

Our Father- Not in Heaven

The Rev. Este Gardner Cantor, Church of Our Saviour

July 29, 2007

In our wonderful reading from Genesis today, Abraham pleads for the fate of Sodom, that undeserving city, like a mischievous little child begging his father for some great favor. In six easy steps, he gets God to agree to have mercy even if there are only 10 good men in the whole city of Sodom. Abraham mirrors our own pleadings for God to answer our prayers, even as we sometimes feel there may be only ten percent at the most that is truly good in us. And yet still we ask, and we receive. God plays the part of the ever-forgiving father, forgiving of Abraham's insolence in his constant bargaining and forgiving even of the corrupt city of Sodom. Abraham asks, asks and asks again, and he receives.

In Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer, Jesus, rather than giving the disciples the magic words they seem to seek, teaches them about the nature of the one they are praying to, the nature of a perfect father.

In this prayer the hierarchy of a father is not the point. God is not introduced as "Our Father in heaven," but simply as "Father." We are so used to hearing God called "Our Father" that its meaning has been lost. But it was a very unusual way to address God at the time that Jesus did it. "Lord, King, glorious, Almighty, all-powerful," these are the terms that would have been more familiar. And in fact, the doxology at the end of the Lord's Prayer, which was added later, fulfills some of what Luke left out- "Thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory" - but that was not there in the gospels. So the compassion, the limitless giving and forgiving of a father seems to be the point of the prayer, not God's great power. God is like a father who would never refuse you what you need- the one you can ultimately rely on with never a doubt. The one who will protect you from trial, and the one who will always forgive you, no matter what.

This makes me reflect on what Jesus' relationship with his earthly father might have been. At first thought, it might seem that Jesus had such a

wonderful concept of God the Father because he had an extraordinary relationship with his own father, Joseph. Perhaps he was never disappointed, never deserted, perhaps his mistakes were always forgiven, perhaps he was always protected. Of course we will never know for sure, but what we do know is that Joseph was a human father, and human fathers are by definition, imperfect. And it may have been that Joseph's beginnings with Jesus were not the of smoothest sort, as Jesus was, in a sense, a step child. We also know that Jesus never mentioned his father at all in the gospels, although Jesus' rare references to earthly fathers are interesting.

Early in Jesus' ministry, a young man approaches Jesus, wanting to follow him and be his disciple. He begs Jesus, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." Jesus says, "Follow me and let the dead bury the dead." (Mt 8:21). And when criticizing the hierarchy of the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus says, "Call no one your father on earth, for you have one father- the one in heaven." He also tells his disciples, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wives and children, brothers and sisters and even life itself cannot be my disciple."

Although Jesus does not mention his earthly father, Joseph was well known to the people Jesus preached to. They objected to Jesus getting above his raisin's saying, "Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? (Jn 6:42)

And in the gospel of John, in another scuffle with the Pharisees, Jesus confronts them with strong language saying, "You are from your father the devil and you choose to do your father's desires. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature for he is a liar and the father of lies." From these few examples, it seems possible at least that Jesus' experience of earthly fathers was not entirely rosy.

The disciples ask Jesus for a special set prayer, one that would identify their faith from others- and they probably wanted one grander than the one Jesus delivered. Jesus gives them a prayer that stands in stark contrast to

the one his father Joseph undoubtedly taught him as a boy- the ancient Hebrew Shema, drawn from Deuteronomy and Numbers. It was required that this prayer be chanted morning and night by all pious Jews and was specifically required to be taught to all children.

The simple, spare text of the Lord's Prayer we read today seems almost comically brief, by contrast. It must have sounded something like this to Jesus' disciples: "You want me to tell you how to pray? OK- pray like this: Dad, may your reign begin. Give us bread, forgive us, keep us from being tempted to do stupid things." That's it. There is not even an Amen.

In great contrast, the Shema, the prayer Jesus had recited since boyhood, goes on for paragraphs, and emphasizes keeping the Lord's commandments, with very specific threats as to what will happen if you don't. A very strict disciplinarian father God is depicted.

The blessings of the Lord; grain, wine and oil, and rain on your fields, are highly conditional on following the commandments. If the commandments are not kept, "The anger of the Lord will blaze against you and he will close up the heavens and you shall not have rain... and you shall perish from the good land the Lord has given you."

This God is not the same loving father that Jesus describes- one who will forgive his child again and again. One who will always provide as a father will provide food to his child.

Psalms 85, a beautiful work probably penned by King David, seems to provide a bridge between the severity of God the father in the Shema and the compassion of the Father in the Lord's Prayer.

The psalmist, cajoling God like Abraham did, recalls a time when God did forgive his people:

You forgave the iniquity of your people; you pardoned all their sin.  
You withdrew all your wrath;

Will you be angry with us forever? Will you prolong your anger to all generations?

Show us your steadfast love, O LORD, and grant us your salvation.

Paul's letter to the Colossians refers to Christ in the most mystical and holy of terms:

For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily,

And then Paul shows us how this impacts on us as lowly, needy humans. He says that since we have died and risen with Christ "we have come to fullness in him."

Coming to fullness in him is knowing, having perfect faith that when you ask it shall be given to you; that if you seek, you shall find, and that if you knock the door will be opened to you. This is to know God as Jesus does, as a perfect father. We ask like a child, we seek like one who is lost, we knock, like one without shelter, but with all these desperate needs, we know we will be taken care of.

When we do manage to admit our vulnerability and get down on our knees and pray, what door is opened to us? It might not be the door we expect. But Jesus has a genius for opening things. When he opens that door, he opens our eyes to God, he opens our hearts, and he opens our minds, perhaps even to such an extent that when that open door reveals something that is God's will and not our own we may grow to accept it.

We are all imperfect, needy, vulnerable, often lost, and we all need a father. But we all share the same fate of having human fathers, fathers who inevitably fail us in one way or another, fathers who may not have been ultimately forgiving. But Jesus opens our eyes to the possibility of having a father who will never forsake us- and who will always forgive us. And he

opens our hearts to the possibility of forgiving our own erring fathers, as we would want them to forgive us.

Jesus seems to love us all the more for our great neediness and he even points out our small virtues- our tendency to care for and lovingly feed our children. As Jesus says, if even we can do that, how much more will our Father in heaven do. And if on occasion, we cannot even do that, if we can't even be the father or the mother that we know we should be, we know there is still God's infinite fatherly forgiveness and the chance to try again.

Amen.