

## **OUR FATHER ... WHAT A NAME!**

In the name of Jesus. Amen

Immediately following the Second World War, the late Helmut Thielecke – who would become one of the great teaching theologians in the Lutheran Church (and one of my favorite “older theologians”) – was pastor of St. Matthew’s Church in Stuttgart, Germany. His parishioners had lived through the traumas of air raids, cannon fire, and bombs. Many of them had lost their sons to the war. And no one – not one – knew what the future would hold for them or for their country, now that the terror of Hitler’s Nazi regime had come to a close. On the second Sunday after the Armistice, with their magnificent church in ruins and only a small fellowship room remaining in tact, they had huddled together for a celebration of the Eucharist. Thielicke wasn’t sure what he could say to them. He had a prepared Sermon – but soon chucked his manuscript and began preaching to them, assuring them that the one whom all Christians call “Our Father” would never abandon or forsake them. He talked about how the effects of war – the sickness, the cancer, the endless rows of tombs – were not the will of this one called “Father.” Rather, he made a very simple, very gospel sentence come alive for them; he said, “This is what our Jesus says to us today: ...don’t you see that everything that torments you and makes you grieve and complain grieves my Father and your Father? *Your sorrows are His sorrows;* otherwise, would I be standing here among you? He has sent me

into the midst of your sorrows.” With that, Thielicke reminded them that the common prayer which spans the world is the very prayer Jesus continually prays with his church: “Our Father, who art in heaven ...”

And so we begin our Lenten journey this year, concentrating on the model prayer, the Lord’s Prayer. Last night, as our Lenten Bible Study began on the Lord’s Prayer, one of those present made the observation that this prayer can become rote – you know, saying words without really thinking about them. It is true that there is always this danger with the familiar. Even so it is the shared hope of Pr. Cathy and I that this Lent new doors of understanding will open for us so that we are called away from taking this prayer for granted. We couldn’t begin in a more wonderful way. Our God has a name which He never tires of hearing: Father.

Within a year after my first grandson was born, and just as he was beginning to talk, I started to call him, “Pal.” Seeing him three times a week when he was just a little guy, he began calling me “gampa” – later “Grampa.” Even though both of us were given formal names when we were born and brought to the Baptismal Font, our endeared names - Pal and Grampa – are the names we still use to call out to each other. That there are special, intimate names we use with those we love is quite common.

Just so, Jesus – when he taught his disciples how to pray – used a wonderful term of endearment to identify the God to whom they were praying: Father. This was revolutionary. The Lord God of Israel, the one who had created all things and brought the heavens and the earth into existence, the one envisioned as the mighty defender of his chosen people, the one who appeared before Isaiah in the Temple as the “Lord of hosts.” – Jesus told them, “You can call him what I call him: Father.” The Aramaic word Jesus used was not a formal title; rather, it was a tender, gentle word: Abba – “Daddy.” We can almost imagine what the disciples must have thought when they heard this: Daddy? Do *I* dare call him that? To which Jesus would have given the answer: Yes.

In the *Small Catechism*, Luther explains what this means: “Here God encourages us to believe that he is truly our Father and we are his children. We therefore are to pray to him with complete confidence just as children speak to their loving father.” In the *Large Catechism* Luther had this wonderful paraphrase: Here I come, dear Father, and pray not of my own accord nor because of my worthiness, but at your command and promise, which cannot fail or deceive me.” This word we use – both individually and corporately – is so powerful that it always grabs God’s attention. And as Jesus teaches us tonight in our Gospel reading, when we call on our heavenly Father in prayer, how much more will he listen because we are his children.

‘What a minute, preacher,” you might be thinking. “I’ve gone to God many times in prayer. I’ve asked him for many things and – well – I don’t think I was heard.” The world, at times, very much seems like an “unfatherly” place. If we believe in a God of grace and mercy, we are stunned sometimes by what we perceive as God’s silence. If we believe that God always hears us and always responds, then why is there such evil in the world, evil that sometimes grabs ahold of me and catches me and deceives me in my weaker moments? Why does this “Daddy God” of ours allow the injustices and the horrors we see other people facing? Is he just too busy for us? Why should God, after all, pay attention to my piddly little prayer when so much else in the world and in – well – even the universe itself – demands his attention? And what about events like accidents, sicknesses that are incurable, the deaths of innocents?

Who hasn’t asked these questions? Even preachers identify with and share such expressed frustrations. We too are sometimes left without answers, especially to such questions as why do good people suffer the most, or why doesn’t God step in and stop all this messiness.

The Bible again and again teaches us that there is that unholy trinity at work in our world: sin, death, and the power of the devil. The sufferings, the horrors, the painful lots so many bear – even

death itself – these things are hostile powers to God and to his creation. We can very easily lose sight of this. God does not will evil; he does not inflict cruelty, heartache or pain. These are the dark henchmen, if you will, of all that is hostile to God's good and gracious will. These are the things Jesus struggled against in his earthly ministry. All we need to remember is the death of his best friend, Lazarus – how our Lord wept, in sorrow and anger, that the dark powers had snatched away his friend from his sisters and from himself. Remember, too, the healing of the paralytic – where Jesus himself spoke of his condition as derangement and disorder brought into the world, not by God, but by other powers at work, trying to unseat this one we call "Father" from his world – and from us.

Rather, Jesus gives us a prayer, and with it a wonderful, loving, embracing name for his Father and the Father of all creation: Abba, daddy. And he gives us this prayer, and this intimate identification of God, because of his own life, death and resurrection. He gives us this prayer and this intimate name, Father, because he is the Father's heart for all of us. It is as if he were saying: "Look to me. Every wound I lay my healing hand upon has ached a thousand times in me; every demon I cast out has leered at me; I died the death that has been experienced in my body millions and millions of times over; I allowed my own body to become the brokenness, the pain and heartache, the frustrations of every age, the torn relationships sin and death have caused; I let my body be torn and buried in the

earth. I suffer when you suffer. I am your “faithful to the end buddy” in your every pain. Gaze at my cross. There’s where my Father’s will truly is. He who sees me sees the Father; and when I suffer for all of you, so to does your heavenly Father suffer the pain, the heartache, the grief and emptiness you know.”

Father. Father. There is no disconnect for this one to whom Jesus gives us this precious name. “Your Father knows your every need, even before you ask it,” Jesus says. We learn from our Lord tonight that the happy gift of prayer consists in the fellowship the Father has created with us, that he gives us his whole heart because of Jesus. This is why Luther so confidently said that we can always come in complete confidence when we pray to God.

And just to add to this: because Jesus taught the disciples – and teaches us – how to pray, he prays this prayer with us. He is the one who went to the mat so that this God of glory and majesty is now known as the one whose approachability is without measure. It does not matter what we bring in our conversations with God – which is what prayer truly is. Because he is our Father, we are truly his children. When our prayers may seem to us weak or tired, Jesus, in praying with us, kicks up our words several notches – even interceding to the Father when we seem to have trouble giving voice to our needs. Jesus is our advocate when we find we cannot utter a word. He gives us this word, though: call God “Father,” go to him as

the one who loves all his children; just utter this word, "Father," and the ears of the Almighty are open.

What a name! Father! Use it when you pray. And never cease to know that this Father always listens, and always answers. Sometimes the answer may come back, "No," but only because our heavenly Father has a much larger "Yes" in mind. Nothing can ever unhinge us as long as we, in confidence, can say with Jesus: Abba! Father!

(Note: the opening illustration comes from Thielicke's wonderful book, *The Prayer that Spans the World*, first published in 1953 in Germany and translated in to English in 1965. Thielicke's meditations on the Lord's Prayer are solidly biblical and wonderfully confessional pieces. This was one of the books my Homiletics Professor, Dr. Herman Stuempfle, recommended for all of us to have in our libraries. I still go to his book – and other books by Thielicke – as rich sources for preaching and teaching.)