

Matthew 6:9-15 (NRSV)

"Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.
10 Your kingdom come.
Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
11 Give us this day our daily bread.^[a]
12 And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our
debtors.
13 And do not bring us to the time of
trial,^[b]
but rescue us from the evil one.^[c]
14 For if you forgive others their
trespasses, your heavenly Father will
also forgive you; ¹⁵but if you do not
forgive others, neither will your Father
forgive your trespasses.

Romans 8:14-17 New Revised Standard
Version (NRSV)

¹⁴For all who are led by the Spirit of God
are children of God. ¹⁵For you did not
receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into
fear, but you have received a spirit of
adoption. When we cry,
"Abba!^[a] Father!" ¹⁶it is that very Spirit
bearing witness^[b] with our spirit that we
are children of God, ¹⁷and if children,
then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs
with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him
so that we may also be glorified with
him.

Matthew 6:9-15 (MSG)

"With a God like this loving you, you can pray
very simply. Like this:
*Our Father in heaven, reveal who you are.
Set the world right; do what's best—as above,
so below.
Keep us alive with three square meals.
Keep us forgiven with you and forgiving others.
Keep us safe from ourselves and the Devil.
You're in charge!
You can do anything you want!
You're ablaze in beauty! Yes. Yes. Yes.*

"In prayer there is a connection between
what God does and what you do. You can't
get forgiveness from God, for instance, without
also forgiving others. If you refuse to do your
part, you cut yourself off from God's part."

Romans 8:14-17 (MSG)

God's Spirit beckons. There are things to do
and places to go!

This resurrection life you received from
God is not a timid, grave-tending life. It's
adventurously expectant, greeting God with a
childlike "What's next, Papa?" God's Spirit
touches our spirits and confirms who we really
are. We know who God is, and we know who
we are. Father and children. And we know we
are going to get what's coming to us—an
unbelievable inheritance! We go through
exactly what Christ goes through. If we go
through the hard times with him, then we're
certainly going to go through the good times
with him!

"Abba"

From the time I was a young child and beginning to learn to speak, my parents taught me, and my siblings, to pray. Our family prayed as we gathered for every meal, we prayed at the conclusion of our weekday morning family devotions, and we prayed at bedtime. Our bedtime prayers included "Now I lay me down to sleep..." followed by the Lord's Prayer. The whole time I was growing up, saying these prayers at bedtime became a tradition of comfort during those sleepy moments when I was calming my mind down to rest. Being a creature of habit, I even yawned at the same place in the Lord's Prayer every night.

As a teenager, however, I discovered that when saying the Lord's Prayer in worship, I had to really focus on what I was doing and saying in order to overcome that habit of yawning at that same place during the Lord's Prayer. Sometimes I was successful, and sometimes it would just happen. That only became an issue when I began leading worship, or a funeral, with a microphone, and would yawn during the Lord's Prayer!! It was strictly the embarrassment that caused me to focus on re-training my brain, and eliminating that habit.

And in the midst of devoting that kind of attention to the recitation of the Lord's Prayer, I realized that I seldom really paid attention to the meaning of this prayer which has been a common denominator for people who believe in Christ from any denomination. Oh, sure, we may trip over trespasses, debts, or sins when we visit another church. But the majority of this prayer we hold in common, because Jesus taught this model prayer to ALL of us!

This prayer was Jesus' response to the disciples' request to teach them how to pray. The disciples had witnessed how important it was to Jesus to communicate with God through prayer, and how powerful those prayers could be in expressing adoration and thanksgiving, seeking healing or guidance, and the offering and receiving of forgiveness. And so Jesus offers this prayer as a model prayer to help the disciples to **grow in their relationship** with their benevolent creator, knowing that our faith will grow each time an individual communicates with God. This prayer was not intended to be a creedal or communal prayer, as we use it today, but rather a starting point for each individual's unique conversation with God.

That is why Jesus began this prayer with a term of endearment: "Abba" "Daddy." When communicating with a loved one, we seldom begin with a formal title. When my children call me on the phone, I long to hear them say, "Hi, MOM!" That is the term of endearment for us! If I hear the voice of one of my children on the phone say, "Mother," or "Rebekah," or "Rev. Sweet," the formality clues me in to other persons listening, or trouble looming. In our scriptural context, the interpreters and translators through the ages have formalized the greeting in this prayer, which Jesus had intended to be an intimate conversation with his "Abba," "Daddy."

It has been interesting in the past 40 years to observe the shift in our ascriptions of God. For many, addressing God as "Father," was offering an ascription of respect due to a divine parental figure. The relationship with God, the Father, was based on many scriptural references, and on the example of the ideal human father/child relationship. As

The Lord's Prayer: "Abba"

July 1, 2018

Rev. Rebekah Sweet

believers began to find language to express a much more omnipotent and all-encompassing God, which could not be diminished to just one gender, many began using non-gendered, and even feminine ascriptions for God. It became more common to refer to God as the Great Physician, Healer, Shepherd, Holy One, the Almighty, Lover, Protector, Bakerwoman God, Womb of Life, Liberator, Comforter, and the list goes on. We call this expansive language for God because it expands our vision of God beyond one gender or role.

Many of you know that my son, Paul is a pastoral intern at the Saratoga Springs UMC where I have been privileged to worship a couple of times as a visitor. While there, I observed an interesting tradition that this congregation has developed related to the Lord's Prayer. There, they close the children's message each Sunday by saying the Lord's Prayer together. AND, before they begin, they ask a child to select the ascription for God for that week. They ask, "Who is God to you today?" Sometimes it is Father, or Mother, or Papa, or Nana. Sometimes it is Friend, or Creator, or Caregiver. The first Sunday I visited there, the designated child picked LOVE. So we all began the prayer with, "Our Love, who art in heaven." And my soul went "Ahhh!"

And there is another part of the opening greeting to this prayer that sometimes challenges me, and should challenge all of us. Our tradition is to begin by saying, "Our Father." When I unpack that, it means that while this prayer is meant to model my intimate, faith-filled communication with God, saying "Our Father" means that the God I address is my God and your God. This God is not mine alone, but in creative faith binds me to the praying person across the aisle, the person who may worship differently than I do, the one whose politics I may not agree with, and the one who is sitting in prison paying the debt for decision that harmed others and now seeks forgiveness. This God to whom I pray is also the God of the single mom who cannot afford groceries this week, the immigrant sitting in a detention center, and the person who didn't get a job because of the color of his skin, her country of origin, or their accent. We sometimes sing, "Our God is an awesome God," but do we think of the enormous number of believers of all kinds included in that "Our?" Do we consider if it is possible to love the God to whom we pray, if we do not love ourselves, and all those others included in "Our?"

The text from Romans, which also uses familial terms of endearment in relation to God, Christ, and the human believer, reminds us that God desires to treat us ALL as favored family. 'So favored in fact, that we are co-heirs with God's own son, Jesus. We are reminded that when we say "yes" to Christ in coming to faith and choosing to follow Christ, we become a part of God's lineage. God promises to provide for our ongoing needs for peace, wisdom, forgiveness and guidance. God loves us as the most loving parent loves a child, and desires that we should not experience want, and know life and love that is abundant. God has given us all of the resources necessary to thrive, to succeed, to be happy, and to live eternally.

So, friends, the first two words of this powerful and traditional prayer speak volumes! They convey who we are, together and individually, in this family of faith, and our understanding of the One to whom we lift our prayers. They also convey our

The Lord's Prayer: "Abba"

July 1, 2018

Rev. Rebekah Sweet

attitudes toward God, ourselves, and our community. In other words, they express our faith! Leslie Brandt writes: "*You, dear friends, are the children of God. There is no language or human medium that can communicate the beauty and significance of that blessed relationship. It is altogether beyond the comprehension of earthbound creatures. Yet it is **this** that God makes possible for you through Jesus Christ.*"ⁱ

May we consider the significance this day of our prayer-relationship with "Abba!"

ⁱ Brandt, Leslie Jesus/Now, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House © 1978, p. 67.