

## Luke 11:2-4

Words - so much a part of our repertoire. They slip off the tongue with hardly a thought. A prayer that encompasses everything we need: God in heaven; daily needs; forgiveness and delivery from evil; it's all there. It really is the perfect prayer.

And yet, familiarity breeds contempt, or at least can hinder our ability to hear God speak. This short series on the Lord's Prayer, the Our Father as known by Catholics, the Jesus Prayer as known by others, over four weeks will delve into what it means, why it has stood the test of time and why the Christian Church loves this prayer so much.

We heard both Luke's and Matthew's version. In Matthew, it is part of a long discourse, full of wide ranging teachings on many topics. In Luke's version, it comes as an answer to a direct request from his followers. When praying, it helps to know who we're praying to. Are we praying to the God envisioned by the Greek philosophers, like Aristotle? The Unmoved Mover God? God as an Unmoved Mover might inspire awe, but why would you pray to him? What good is an Unmoved Mover when your child is sick or your heart is broken or your cupboards are bare? What would we accomplish by praying to a God who is unmoved by our prayers?

Or are we praying to the God that theologian and philosopher Jonathan Edwards preached about? The angry God whose hands are full of sinners? Edwards preached that God always had his hands full of sinners, ready to toss them into the fiery abyss of hell whenever his "sovereign pleasure" saw fit. Edwards explained that by sovereign pleasure, he meant God's "arbitrary will, restrained by no obligation." Edwards' God doesn't need a reason to toss anybody into hell.

This God might inspire terror, but why bother praying to such a God? After all, this is a God whose will is arbitrary. How could we ever trust him, let

alone believe that he loved us enough to listen? He's more apt to fling us headlong into the lake of fire, than to hear our prayers. And even if he hears our prayers, he obviously doesn't think too much of them. According to Edwards, in God's eyes we're just a burden!

Thankfully, Jesus doesn't teach us to pray to an Unmoved Mover; nor to an Angry God who barely tolerates our mere existence. No, Jesus says: When you pray, say: "Father." Jesus taught us to pray to the Father.

The Father we meet in Luke responds to prayer with a goodness and faithfulness incomparably greater than that of earthly parents and wants to give more than anyone could ask or imagine: the Spirit and the Kingdom. This Father loves with a mercy beyond human reasonableness and fairness and beyond our ability to meet God's love with our own. To love as God loves is life for us and our highest calling. As in the parable of the prodigal son, the compassion of the father shows that whatever we may lack in love for God and neighbour, whether we waste our gifts or hoard them, God loves us relentlessly. We are pushing against an open door when we pray, because, in a sense, we are already inside, members of the holy family ourselves, brothers and sisters of the Son, with the same Spirit, the same love.

The Lord's Prayer is not a "repeat after me" prayer, although there's nothing wrong with saying it. Jesus was telling us to "***pray like this***" and not "***pray this***." Although Jesus denounced prayer when it resulted in mere recitation, he elevated it as a thing to be lived out. Prayer is communication with God, yet it is also a declarative statement of faith - not something to be paraded, but something to be lived out in life, confessed by actions as well as words.

This gift to us is too wonderful to become a rote recitation. It is prayer, the *Lord's Prayer*. Pray it sincerely, but also confess it completely by living out its meaning in the world. Prayed by Christians around the world, it announces to the world the God in whom we trust and the faith we profess to believe. Believers pray. Those who pray, believe.

The prayer might be considered a creed if confessed openly by living it rather than simply reciting it, heaping up the “empty phrases” that Jesus denounced. To a large degree, confession is the purpose of the prayer. It identified the Twelve as followers of the One who originated the prayer. Other rabbis did the same thing, giving their disciples an identifying prayer, a kind of abridged confessional statement on which they could depend when needs arose. While Jesus intended his prayer for praying, it was also meant as a faith statement long before more detailed confessions and creeds evolved.

True prayer is always accompanied by appropriate conduct. If prayer and conduct are both perfect, no distinction can be drawn between them. So the proper relation between prayer and conduct is not that conduct is supremely important and prayer may help it, but that prayer is supremely important and conduct *tests* it.

Jesus’ Father is an ideal Father, who loves his children, chastising when needed, but more often than not providing them with encouragement to fully live as his redeemed children, with sanctified personalities that reflect him and yet are distinctly personal. There is warmth and intimacy in this relationship.

Helmut Thielicke, a German theologian, compared modern humanity to someone going through a forest in the pitch blackness of night. He is all alone. He does not know what spooks lurk in the dark shadows, nor if the disquieting noises are real threats or benign. The human is filled with fear. If only he could speak with a guide who knows the forest well, and could lead him to the other side! If only such a guide would ease his anxiety by assuring him of the guide’s powerful ability to protect him! If only that guide could provide a pervasive light that would eliminate the shadows and push back the darkness!

As the human considers these possibilities, he convinces himself that there is no such guide, there is only silence. He is convinced that he is truly alone

in the darkest forest one can imagine. He begins to talk to himself, out loud, nervously, awkwardly, but it works. He finds comfort in his own voice, momentarily, until he dissolves in fear and total fright, as he realizes he is only talking to himself. He has not changed, nor has the forest. No one has come. It is as fearsome as ever. He is as weak and as alone as before.

In the forest of life, God is more than a guide. God is the forest's careful planter and knowing caretaker. The traveller, rather than talking with himself, receives genuine comfort while conversing with God. There is fellowship, community, dialogue. The alien noises and threatening dangers are shrunk to human size, for God provides courage to battle the unknown, unafraid. God sheds light where there was none before. He puts his arms around our shoulders. And we feel not only the personal touch but also his protective assurances. We hear more than our own voice; we hear His.

Jesus demonstrated this life-giving dialogue repeatedly to his disciples. He was one who prayed often. Up in the hills, out by the sea, in a quiet garden, Jesus prayed. He always returned to his colleagues more rested, more certain, more determined, more tranquil than before. No wonder they sought such a relationship themselves! In Jesus, the Twelve saw more than a man in a forest, but one who stepped through the thickets of life briskly, unafraid, purposefully. If only he could teach them how it was done! That was the thought aching in their heart and brain.

“Lord, teach us to pray....,” they begged. And Jesus did. “When you pray, say: Father.....” Then unfolded one of the most sublimely beautiful supplications ever to be spoken. In this prayer that became for the followers of Jesus a creed, we discover that the key to marching through life's forest is not in going it alone - but in eagerly confessing the incredible relationship we have as trusting children of our caring Father.

In addition to that, we discover our relationship to one another and the relationship to responsibility that comes from the intimate assurances of

having such a Father. We are people wandering through a dark, frightening, world-encircling forest, who need a father who claims us, calms us, who gives us the faith we confess unitedly, a Father whom we can trust.

The two-way relationship that unites the praying Christian with God is the tenderness of a paternal love that knows no rigid limits between divine parent and earthly child. God is not only our Father, he is far more intimately our *Daddy*. Whereas Matthew and Luke wrote their gospels in Greek, Jesus spoke Aramaic, a Semitic dialect. As he addressed the heavenly Father in the Garden of Gethsemane by the familiar term *Abba*, a number of New Testament scholars reason that, Jesus first began the Lord's Prayer with the same intimacy: "Daddy."

The address used by Jesus, *Abba*, is a childlike and familiar diminutive. In Greek it would be *papa* rather than *pater*. We are to understand *Abba* as a covenant of faithfulness and trust. In the witness of Jesus, this relation binds the Father unconditionally to his children, come what may. It is not a sentimental use, a daring familiarity, a coarse and sloppy fraternizing with God. It is family intimacy.

This intimacy is illustrated with a story about a triumphant Roman emperor. The emperor had the privilege of leading victorious armies through the streets of Rome in a great parade. There marched the conquering soldiers, their banners flying, their helmets gleaming, along with the ragtag defeated prisoners carrying the spoils of war. A small boy watched the great parade, cheering and shouting, until he saw the emperor's chariot. He jumped from the platform on which he sat, darted through the crowds, burrowed through the legions lining the route, and ran toward the emperor.

"You can't do that, boy," said a legionary, who swooped down and caught him, hoisting him into his muscular arms. "That's the emperor. You can't run down to his chariot." The tyke laughed and slithered down out of the soldier's grip, saying, "He may be your emperor, but he's my daddy."

That is exactly the way the Christian feels towards God. The might and the majesty, and the power - are the might, and the majesty and power of one whom Jesus taught us to call *Father.... Daddy....Abba.*

Jesus portrayed this enriching concept in the words of a parable. As he spoke about the prodigal son, he also unveiled the kindly, caring nature of the prodigal's father, who waits with open arms, ready to celebrate his son's return, a father who forgives. Nor is he an indifferent father. "You fathers, if your children ask for a fish, do you give them a snake instead? Or if they ask for an egg, do you give them a scorpion? Of course not! If you sinful people know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?" says Jesus.

"Abba! Father!" These words are not a guarantee that there will be no sorrow, no questions, no times of terrible waiting, no cup of suffering, no cross in our lives. Nor will they automatically take us out of our own Garden of Gethsemane. But they will take us through Gethsemane and on to the cross, where we find in Christ the promise that there is one thing that he endured that you need never endure: the just retribution for our sin.

Here is a relationship worth confessing often: God is truly a dear and loving Father. In the opening word of Jesus' most beloved prayer, we discover a sublime intimacy that makes our relationship exceedingly close and very dear. Then we learn something more. When we together acknowledge "Father," we assume another relationship; that of responsibility. We are responsible to God, but we are also responsible *for* and *to* one another.

A German theologian said that the Lord's Prayer "is not an egotistic religious prayer but a social kingdom prayer. It is not an *"I"* prayer but a *"We"* prayer. It is not a prayer for *me* but a prayer for *us*. If we come before God in true prayer, we do not simply come before the God who is our private God, but before the God who is the God of us all.

The hinge by which this lid of the Lord's Prayer is opened is God's love through us. When we say "Father," it is because his love so fills us that we must share it with all those around us, including those beyond the folds of Christianity. It's what sent Paul scurrying to Asia Minor and Europe. It's what sent Peter to Rome, Thomas to India, and others to Africa. It's the kind of love that changes people into our brothers and sisters, and the unbelieving into members of God's family.

Just as we cannot pray "Father" and despise another Christian, so we cannot pray those words and disdain Muslim or Jew, Buddhist or Hindu. We are to love them eagerly as God's creations, even though we reject their theologies intellectually and spiritually. Similarly, we cannot pray "Father" and ignore the hungry and homeless. They are members of his household. We cannot pray "Father" and neglect the starving children of Africa. We cannot pray "Father" and turn our heads from the sick and dying, from those addicted to drugs and those absorbed in themselves.

We are responsible to God for their well-being, for their enlistment in the family of faith. When we pray "Father," we are not praying alone. We pray collectively as the body of Christ, the church. When we pray the Lord's Prayer, we are to truly pray it - and *confess* it. Then we become nurtured by it to act on our unity as God's people and to minister to the needs of sheep not of his flock.

Sometimes we might feel like Thielicke's wanderer in life's forest, fearful and alone. Many Indigenous tribes practised something called "The Vigil." Young boys were taught by their fathers how to survive in the rugged outdoors. As they grew older, they were prepared to become braves in the tribe. The boys were taken into the deepest, darkest part of the forest, where they were to spend the night - all alone. As dusk dimmed the light in the woods, the boys' father leaves. The boy was left alone.

Every hoot of the owl made him jump, every baying of a wolf at an unseen

moon made him cringe, and every snap of twig by a wandering deer caused him alarm. He had to spend the night alone, maintaining his courage in a frightful darkness, waiting the long hours' passage in the agony. Yet the young boy was not by himself. The father kept vigil with his son. He stationed himself secretly nearby, where he could keep watch over his child and be ready to protect him if danger came.

Sometimes we are unaware that God watches over us with more tenderness than that boy's father. All we need do is call upon him, this eternal father, this heavenly Daddy, as did Jesus: *Abba! Father!* He is nearer than the breeze that caresses you, no further than the left hand is from the right when it assumes the attitude of prayer.

**Amen.**



## Prayers of the people - Pentecost 2 - June 2, 2024

Eternal God, You have been our resting place through the ages. Generations come and pass away, but You abide forever. We praise You for Your presence among us. You bring us comfort amid our trials, clarity where confusion persists, peace in the midst of conflict, and hope of eternal life. Hear us now as we pray for Your Church and the needs of the world, as we respond with: Father, Abba ... **Send us Your Spirit!**

God of faithfulness and truth, we pray for the world around us, for people whose names we do not know, yet whose hurts fill the news, and whose afflictions touch us not nearly long enough. We have the privilege of being able to change a channel, or turn a page, but they endure the long days and months of famine and thirst, of war and feud, of corruption and despair. Solutions may not be easy for all the ills of this world, but in each hurting place send Your Spirit, that those who do have the power to affect the changes needed use their power for the protection and well-being of all. We pray for the day when justice, peace and honour may be experienced by all. Father, Abba ... **Send us Your Spirit!**

We pray for the millions of homeless people, many of whom we will never meet, but whose precarious lives we see on TV, on our streets, and in the parks of our cities. Please bless those front-line service providers and humanitarian agencies who attempt to care for them, and all who give generously to support their work. Father, Abba ... **Send us Your Spirit!**

Daily, many are suffering physical, emotional, and mental abuse: domestic violence against women and children, others beaten up by robbers, tortured for information, verbally abused and denigrated, left with untended wounds, threatened with the injury of loved ones, sexually molested, kidnapped, or slowly killed. Father, Abba ... **Send us Your Spirit!**

At this moment there are thousands who are in terror or despair because of natural disasters: Floods and house fires, tornados, cyclones and earthquakes, avalanches or wild fires, droughts or lightning strike, storm waves or volcanic eruptions. Father, Abba ... **Send us Your Spirit!**

We ask today, O God, for those who have lost hope and for those who have never had it. Grant to us and to those we lift before you in our hearts a new and abiding vision of what have you have done, and what you are doing, and

what you will do, to save and redeem your people and indeed the creation itself. Grant, O God, that all might see and believe and discover their purpose and the purpose of all that is and all that is yet to be. Father, Abba ... **Send us Your Spirit!**

We pray for ourselves, for the hopes and hurts, the brightness and gloom that populate our waking and our sleeping hours. Help us to separate our needs from our wants, that we may discern where our true priorities ought to be in our lives. In a world where consumption rules and many have become accustomed to plenty, remind us of the many who are less fortunate, and remind us to live with gratitude for the privileges we take for granted, and the bounty we believe is our entitlement, and not Your gift. Father, Abba ... **Send us Your Spirit!**

We pray for the Church, the family of hopeful people, persistent in faithfulness and graciousness, marked by a willingness to work in thoughtful leadership, generosity of spirit, and lovingkindness, not shirking the hours or the cost involved: for Bishops Anna, Linda, Susan and Kathy, for newly-elected bishops Jason and Ali, for all pastors, priests, deacons, musicians and lay leaders, that the Holy Spirit inspire and encourage them; for Grace Lutheran in Burnaby - Rev. Nathan Fong, Mount Zion Lutheran in Smithers, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Jordan and the Holy Land, the congregation of San Juan Camino d'Esperanze and Pastor Ana Maria Jara. Father, Abba ... **Send us Your Spirit!**

This week, the world community recognized the May 30 International Day of United Nations (UN) Peacekeepers. For 76 years, UN peacekeepers have worked to save and change lives in the world's most fragile or volatile political and security situations. Since 1948, more than two million uniformed and civilian personnel have helped countries to transition from war to peace. Today, more than 70,000 peacekeepers serve in 11 missions deployed in hotspots around the world. Father, Abba ... **Send us your Spirit!**

Creating God and Prince of Peace, protect international men and women who have sacrificed a comfortable and secure life in their home countries to provide technical assistance and a peaceful presence in some of the most dangerous regions of the world today. We pray that all men, women, and children will some day know peace and economic stability and may live outside of the shadows of external peacekeepers. May those of us not directly impacted by the presence of foreign peacekeepers and separated

loved ones always realize our necessary commitment to peace, security, and upholding the human rights of all beyond our native borders. Father, Abba ...  
**Send us Your Spirit!**

Abba, Father, mothering God, help your church to do whatever we can to lessen the injustices and multiple sufferings of humanity. Encourage each of us to rest our own pain and grief in your infinite mercy, and to not cease from directing our righteous anger, prayer and appropriate actions to the ongoing work of reconciliation and healing.

**Amen!**

**Our Father ...**