

June 20, 2010  
Luke 11: 1 – 13

Father's Day:

### SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION

In today's scripture the disciples ask Jesus to teach them to pray, and Jesus teaches the Lord's prayer- not a set of words that must be said, but rather a pattern for praying, a sample prayer, that can guide us in the way we come to God.

And he then continues to teach how ready God is to answer prayer. He uses human beings as a foil, a contrast with God. Human beings will give what another wants, if they're nagged enough, how much more will God be ready to give without being nagged. Human fathers give good things to their children, how more will God be ready to give to us what is good.

### SERMON: "OUR FATHER"

One of the best books I've read recently is a dark little story called "The Road". Set in some future time, an unnamed calamity has happened, and the planet has died. The earth is dead. There is not a plant or an animal that has survived.

Only a few human beings are left. Their options are limited- they can forage for canned goods, relics of former days, they can join gangs that hunt other human beings for food; or they can kill themselves- it's a dark little book.

There is no hope for the future. And the story finds a father and his young son walking down the road. How does a father behave in these circumstances?

It's not an irrelevant question- our world is a dark place in many ways- often the powerful prey on the weak and vulnerable. How does a father raise a child in a world where the culture calls us to take care only of ourselves?

THIS father teaches his son how to survive, how to protect himself, how to find food, and he urges him to keep going down the road, not because he knows what's down there, but because he doesn't know.

Even when there is no hope, this father teaches his son to hope, to keep going.

And he teaches him who he is- he tells him that they are the good guys, that they carry the fire within them, and the boy treasures this knowledge, that he has a responsibility to do good, to be caring, even though no one else is, and even when there is no obvious point.

The father is honest with his son, always tells him the truth- so that the boy can stretch inside to learn to deal with harsh reality.

The father is honest about his own fear; so his son knows that it's OK to be afraid. And the father listens to his son, accepts his feelings, his failures, loves him totally and unconditionally.

Some of us may have had a father like this. Certainly he is the father we'd all like to have had - a strong father who protects us from great harm, guides us, teaches us how to handle ourselves in the world, and always, always extends grace.

We find these same elements of the "good father" in what is commonly called the Lord's prayer, but I like to think of this prayer as the Father's prayer. In it we turn to God as our perfect Father, from whom we seek daily provision, protection and guidance, and always, always grace.

Some of us may have difficulty praying to God as Father. The word "Father" just evokes too many negative emotions-

We may have had a father who was violent, abusive, failed to provide for us, protect us, guide us, and who judged and condemned us when what we needed was grace.

It can, however, be healing to discover that in God we have the Father we always wanted. God, the perfect Father, walks down the road with us, guiding and teaching us everything we need to know, if we will take his hand, so to speak.

Some do not like calling God "Father" because it ascribes male gender to God, which appears to give the edge to men as being created in the image of God. I would suggest that that is too literal an interpretation of calling God "Father"

God is "Spirit", entirely "other", and ALL the words we use to refer to God are merely images drawn from this material world, images that evoke a particular understanding of God.

There are female images of God throughout the scripture: very first image of God in the Hebrew scriptures is actually of a mother bird, brooding over the waters of chaos, to bring creation to life! Often when God's compassion is spoken of, the image used is of God's womb being stirred.

And we don't conclude that God is female any more than we conclude that God is male, because we use the image of "father"

And Jesus isn't actually saying that we MUST call God "Father"- he is giving us a pattern for prayer; he says we should come to God as we might come to a loving father. In fact the word he uses is "Abba". we would say, "papa, daddy".

The sounds, "abba, papa" like, 'mama" are the first sounds that an infant makes, and Jesus is saying, "reach out to God in prayer, like an infant, open to receive, confident that we're loved, that we'll be heard, that our needs will be met."

Recently we received an e-mail from the Obara family in Kenya. 9 year old Lauryne writes that she can locate Toronto on the map and she sees it's very close to Chicago. Her Dad tells her Obama's home is in Chicago. "Do we ever see him?" she asks.

Well, he'll be right here in the city next weekend, but he may as well remain in the White House- for all the access any of us could have to him- we'd have no hope of getting through the protocol, procedures, guards, security and checkpoints.

However, none of these restrictions apply to his daughters, Mila and Sasha. They have clear access to their daddy.

When we call God our Daddy, we're awakening in us the little child who knows that daddy is as eager to see us and hear what we have to say as we are to tell it all.

When we come to "daddy God", we can be bold to ask for what we need, and we know that if what we ask for is reasonable, and if Daddy can do it, he will. As Jesus says according to Luke, "What father doesn't give to his child a good thing when they ask for it.?"

So using the word "Abba, Daddy" shapes our attitude as we pray. We pray with openness and hope and expectation, and the knowledge that we are loved, and our needs are important.

In teaching us how to pray, Jesus tells us what is reasonable to ask for: we all need physical sustenance- it's OK to ask for that.

We all fall short in some way: it's OK to ask for grace, forgiveness-- for ourselves, and to pass on to others. We don't KNOW everything and are prone to go astray: and it's OK to seek guidance and protection.

A little word that helps us to keep our requests reasonable is the word 'OUR'. Not MY Father, but OUR Father.

"OUR" reminds us that we're not going to Daddy God for personal favours. We're not asking for anything that we would not also desire for our brother and sister.

If I need provision for my material needs, so does my brother and sister. If I need forgiveness, so does my neighbour. If I need safety, and guidance, so do all God's children.

The word "OUR" shapes our attitude when we come in prayer. It keeps us humble, reminds us that we're no more deserving than anyone else.

The word "OUR" calls us to identify with ALL our brothers and sisters, not only with the gentle, beloved, brave people whom we admire, but also the needy, stumbling, weak and wicked people in the world. For they are all God's children. And this is humbling.

We may find it hard to pray in this way – to come to God with an attitude of selfless humility. We may find it hard to come to God at all, to admit our weakness, our need- as adults we don't readily do that, we don't readily ask for help.

And yet in the spiritual realm it seems that in order to receive we need to ask- asking, admitting our need, breaks down our pride, breaks our hearts open and seems to set in motion a movement of God's compassion- as we reach out to God, so God comes to meet us at the point of our need.

The great Scottish preacher Alexander McLaren tells this story: When he was 16 years old he got his first job 6 miles from home in the big city, Glasgow.

This was the first time that he'd been away from home and his father insisted that he come home at the end of the first week, on the Saturday night;

The problem was that between his home and Glasgow was a deep valley that was rumoured to be haunted, where terrible things had been known to happen, and the youngster was terrified to cross through this valley at night time.

He worried about it all week. But his father had insisted and so he came home, but as he reached the valley, he stopped, his knees were weak with fear, and he just could not go on, and the tears came to his eyes.

Then suddenly he heard the sound of footsteps and there emerged out of the shadows, he says the greatest man on this earth. His father- embraced him, never said a word about his maybe being afraid, just that he 'd missed him and couldn't wait to see him, so he thought he'd come to meet him on the way.

"And so," McLaren says "shoulder to shoulder, we went down into the valley, and I was not afraid of anything that walked."

Whenever we take a step towards our Father God, whether it is an attempt to pray as we ought, or to live as we ought- whenever we attempt to forgive- and this can be like entering a dark valley- our little, fearful steps will take us into the arms of our Father, who comes to meet us and help us to come through.

As we walk down the road with our Father, God, as we hang out with our Father, as we spend time with God- in prayer, in scripture, in worship, something subtle begins to change within us:

As we walk down the road of life in God's company, something of the grace and the light of God seeps into us. We begin to take on a family likeness. We find more and more that we ARE carrying the fire within us:

As we keep company with God, we find we have the grace to SHARE more with others; to FORGIVE our brothers and sisters their missteps, their follies and even the evil they do, and we WORK for a world where, as the scripture says, "everyone can sit under their vine and under their fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid."

This is the will of God that we pray for in the Father's prayer. This is the kingdom, the new world, that Jesus ushers in.

A world, where we all have enough, where we are compassionate and gracious towards one another, and where everyone has their just and rightful place. Amen, may it be so, and may it begin with ourselves.

To God be all the praise, the honour and the glory, Amen.