How Did You Get Your Name?

A meditation on Luke 11: 1 – 4

Rev. Cathy C. Hoop Grace Presbyterian Church July 11, 2021

Maybe it’s because I’ve been at our Presbytery’s Living River camp for a week with elementary age kids – who are wonderful – but I noticed something about the introduction to this prayer that I hadn’t really thought much about before.

Did you catch this – Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he stopped, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, *just as John [the baptizer] taught his disciples*.”

Maybe it’s because I’ve been at camp – where there is a lot of friendly competition. Cleanest cabin is awarded each day – with an enormous trophy. If you ever went to camp, you remember how hard it is to actually keep a cabin clean. There is a tradition at Living River to take it to a whole new level – their cabins weren’t just clean, they were staged! They left encouraging notes on the mirrors for the judges. They set up clever scenes – arranging their teddy bears in a circle, each with their own Bible open to the day’s scripture passage. (Using the Bible for bonus points ?!? I’m not so sure about that!)

Much friendly competition - they compete at “porch singing” before dinner - taking turns coming up with songs in a given category – such as Christmas carols or Disney tunes. The prize they are competing for? First cabin to go through the line at dinner.

Camp becomes an extended version of family…with all the blessings and all the challenges. The “when is it *our turn*?” and the “why did *their cabin* get to \_\_\_\_\_?”

Just like the tension that exists between cabins at camp, a bit of envy when you aren’t a part of that winning cabin, it feels like this disciple is a little envious, a little unsettled. I love this scene – there’s Jesus, in a “certain place” praying. Trying to find a little time alone to talk with God. And there’s a disciple, trying to be patient, pacing up and down, urgently needing an answer to this burning question, wondering if Jesus is ever going to finish. Finally, Jesus lifts his head, rises from the ground, and though probably in need of a moment to transition back to the world beneath his feet, sees one of his disciples, anxiously waiting there. “John taught *his* disciples to pray…why haven’t you given *us* a prayer?” It wasn’t unusual for a particular group of disciples to have a particular prayer that defined them, not unlike the way we have creeds and confessions that shape us as Presbyterians.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Whatever the motivation for the question, Jesus welcomes this teaching moment and takes full advantage of it! That disciple had no idea what he was asking, but we can all give thanks for his question, as Jesus’ response continues to take us far beyond what words to say when we pray. The prayer that rolls off Jesus’ lips is a prayer that encapsulates God’s vision for us, for the kin-dom. The prayer that Jesus teaches to his disciples – a brief prayer with deceptively simple language - reveals the depth of God’s compassion for us, the breadth of God’s forgiveness, the vastness of God’s longing for all creation to live in wholeness.

And so Jesus begins, “Father” in Luke’s version or “Our Father” in Matthew’s. “Father, may your name be honored. “Uphold the holiness of your name.” Or more traditionally, “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be your name.” The story is told of the parent praying with their child, and hearing the child say, “Our Father, who art in heaven, how did ya’ get your name?” Isn’t that fabulous? Makes more sense to a child than “hallowed,” an archaic term which we probably only ever use when saying the Lord’s Prayer. It’s probably the question we need to address as much as any question in a study of this prayer, since we tend to do things differently here at Grace. Here we invite people to expand upon what Jesus said, to say “Our Mother and Father God” while also encouraging you to use the language that is most comfortable for you. So, if “Father” was good enough for Jesus, why a need to expand upon that? We mean no disrespect…actually the hope is to expand the respect…recognizing God as more life giving than any one word can contain. By expanding the language, we acknowledge that our faith tradition was born within the limitations of a patriarchal model, and that that model falls far short of God’s identity, far short of God’s vision of the kin-dom.

If you are a numbers person you might find this interesting: in Mark, the earliest known gospel, Jesus calls God “Father” on four occasions. By the time we get to John’s Gospel, written some sixty years later, Jesus calls God “Father” 118 times. Mark’s account is much briefer than John’s but that doesn’t explain such a vast increase in the use of this term. It is very possible that John’s version reflects the developing of corporate prayers and practice within the early faith community.[[2]](#endnote-2)

There is much support for calling God “Father,” and that may be the language that is most familiar to you. There is nothing wrong with that as long as we also recognize that father imagery for God is incomplete at best, and that at its most limiting, it excludes those who wonder if they are made in the image of a “father.” Scripture has never sought to limit images of God. C. Clifton Black describes the “riot of metaphors” in the Hebrew Bible, everything from King, rock, shelter and hiding place to nursing mother or spurned mother. God is a planter, a warrior, a healer, a shield.[[3]](#endnote-3) At any given moment, God is a “motherly father” or a “fatherly mother” if that idea is helpful to you. Or maybe it’s just easier to let go of all of these limiting binaries, and to appreciate the mixed metaphors of a God in whom can be found the beautiful diversity of the gender spectrum.

Many and varied ways to connect with God, to encounter God’s presence. In some moments you may need God the rock, and in others you may need the God who plants. In this instance Jesus chooses “Father.” “Father,” Jesus prays, and immediately we hear “relationship.” Jesus doesn’t choose to pray to the King of Heaven or the God of Salvation, or the Light of Life, or any other of the myriad names from which he could have chosen. Jesus prays, “Father,” and so what we know is that Jesus is praying as God’s child and teaching us to pray as God’s children. We pray to the God who birthed us and breathed life into us. You’ve probably heard all that relationship stuff before.

But, theologian N.T. Wright pushes us to think a little differently about this use of “Father.” What Jesus is doing here, he suggests, is giving the disciples more than just the assurance of relationship, Jesus is giving them a link back to the beginnings of the story of their people, and their faith. Jesus is linking them back to the God who liberates, who rescues, who restores, and who calls upon all who love God to participate in that work. Here is Wright’s observation: “The very first word of the Lord’s Prayer contains within it not just intimacy but ***revolution***, not just familiarity; ***hope***.”[[4]](#endnote-4) Revolution? The word “Father”?

*Where’s the connector here?* Wright directs our attention back to Moses, back to the story of slavery and freedom. Exodus 4: 22 – 23a

 Then say to Pharaoh, ‘This is what the Lord says: Israel is my oldest son. **23**I said to you, “Let my son go so he could worship me.”

God as Israel’s father, a parent who will do whatever necessary to rescue their children, to lift the oppression from their backs. Wright continues, “When Jesus tells his disciples to call God ‘Father’, then, those with ears to hear will understand. He wants us to get ready for the new Exodus.”[[5]](#endnote-5) Through the years of wandering in the wilderness, through the building of the first Temple and its destruction, through the exile, and the partial return, God had been with them. Yet they still lived with oppression and hope can grow thin. God’s people had suffered under the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Egyptians, and now Romans, but with each Passover celebration, they awaited the Messiah. They awaited freedom.

As God instructed Moses to claim freedom for God’s child, Israel, so Jesus plants the seeds of liberation with the disciples. Jesus says to them, “this is your prayer. You are the liberty-people. You are the Messianic people.”[[6]](#endnote-6)

The power of a single, holy, word, to link one story to another, to link one hope to another. Revolution? Have you ever heard that in the Lord’s Prayer? I had not. “Father,” “Our Father,” “Our Mother and Father God.” Words of relationship and unity, but revolution? That is something to live with, to meditate upon. And as we do, we remember another time when Jesus called upon God as Father: when, in the garden of Gethsemane, having fed his disciples one last holy meal, Jesus wept with God. Jesus wept knowing that the suffering was an inevitable outcome of walking this broken earth in disruptive holiness. He wept, and he called on God as Father, letting go of his despair, that he might move through it to new life, calling upon us to follow.

Revolution does not come without pain. We know this. We witness Jesus’ life, the lives of his disciples. As we boldly call upon God as Father, Mother, we join in Jesus’ liberating work – setting the captives free, restoring those in despair, feeding, sheltering, clothing, listening to those who have been silenced, so that together we can be God’s kin-dom people. Thanks be to God. Amen.

1. [Part 1: Our Father, Our Mother | Good Ground Press](https://goodgroundpress.com/faith/retreats/our-father/our-father-our-mother/) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Black, C. Clifton Interpretation, The Lord’s Prayer, p. 61. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Wright, N. T.. The Lord and His Prayer (p. 5). Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.. Kindle Edition. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Wright, N. T.. The Lord and His Prayer (p. 4). Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.. Kindle Edition. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Wright, N. T.. The Lord and His Prayer (p. 5). Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.. Kindle Edition. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)