

Gary L. Bagley
Hilton Presbyterian Church
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Terms of Endearment
Isaiah 61:10-62:3; Galatians 4:4-7

The Apostle Paul wasn't big on the Christmas story as we know it. His only reference to Jesus birth is included in the epistle reading for today—

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law...(Galatians 4:4-7)

Two distinct attributes of this birth reference are that Jesus was fully human—“born of a woman”—and that he was a Jew—“born under the law.”

A second characteristic about this birth reference is that the salvation experienced in Jesus' was for the community *and* for the individual. The Jews' understanding of salvation is primarily for the group—the nation.

Salvation directed to the individual, however, is seen in the term Jesus used in praying—“Abba Father.” What Jesus gave to his followers and to us through his teachings is a deeper pattern of spirituality. Many have said he was a mystic in addition to his other attributes. As the heart goes, so goes one's life. The way Jesus prayed is perhaps the biggest clue to his call to personal salvation—a way that changes the heart.

For a world that seems rather non-religious at times, a fairly recent Gallup survey (1999) found that 90 percent of Americans pray, and that 75 percent pray on a daily basis. The Simpson's TV series was constantly peppered with religion, and particularly prayer.

After one Thanksgiving turns into a disaster, Homer Simpson loses it, offering thanks “for the occasional moments of peace and love our family's experienced...well, not today. You saw what happened. O Lord, be honest! Are we the most pathetic family in the world, or what?” (His sister-in-law Selma comments, “Worst prayer yet.”) By the conclusion of the episode, the conflicts are resolved and, as the soundtrack plays “We Gather Together,” the family eats turkey sandwiches. “O Lord,” Homer says, “on this blessed day, we thank thee for giving our family one more crack at togetherness.”

Prayer, whether it's an "O, Dear God!" or "Jesus!" in school or the workplace, is important to more people than we realize. The question that is rarely asked is: "How are we supposed to pray?"

For any who might be following along in their Greek New Testaments this morning (!), the word in both the gospels of Luke and Matthew that contain this disciples' prayer is the Greek word, *pater* meaning, "father." However, Jesus spoke in Aramaic, the spoken language of his time and his region—not Koine Greek. The word that Jesus used in relating to God was the Aramaic term, *Abba*.

Only three times is *Abba* used in the New Testament—Mark 14:36, Romans 8:15 and today's Galatians 4:6. Mark's use of this word is included in the story of the Garden of Gethsemane and the prayer he prayed in that story:

Abba, Father, all things are possible to you; take this cup from me. Yet not my will but yours. (REB)

The passages in Romans and Galatians are somewhat confirmations from the first century church that Jesus' term of addressing God was that Aramaic term, *Abba*. The word was literally the first babbling sounds of an infant. Joachim Jeremais' studies of *The Prayers of Jesus* indicated from ancient manuscripts that when a child began to taste wheat, that is, was weaned from his mother's milk, he learned to say *Abba*—sometimes *Abba or Imma*. The word is our equivalent to *Ma-ma or Da-da*. It is not as much a masculine or feminine form as it is a parental form of address. It was the most intimate form with which a child addressed his or her mother or father.

Rarely was God addressed as Father in the Old Testament, but it does occur in several spots. Jesus way of relating to his Father-Mother in such intimate terms was radical. Addressing God as *Abba* brought the relationship between him and God back to a closeness/ oneness that is rarely felt in the Old Testament. The idea of *Abba* invites a sense of trust, openness, and oneness. This one word has probably affected my theology and personal spirituality more than anything else I have discovered in the Bible. It moved my image of God away from images such as the Policeman in heaven, the spoiler of fun, the one you need to make happy and get approval from. It relates a tenderness and understanding that is often omitted in sermons, comments and religious corners. The use of that word implies a relationship that encourages you to discover yourself and life...a God

who is a very present Help in time of trouble...One who helps us get back in sync with goodness, kindness, justice, and peace.

The problem in using this analogy wrapped in the image of *Abba* is that no fathers or mothers are perfect...and many are far from the ideal. How hard is it for a woman (or a man), who was sexually abused by a father to have trusting feelings about Father-God? How hard is it for a person who had a mother or father who responded with punishment before asking any questions to tell all? How many persons never had a parent who really tried to understand the pain, loneliness, or embarrassment before offering advice? How many persons had parents who were never around for them?

We begin our life with a sense of perfect trust in the adults of our life. But, somewhere early in our childhood, a fear of falling, of loud noises, and of being abandoned begins to develop.

While Jesus last few months were focused on the injustice of his people, the bulk of his teaching was directed at helping people rediscover the oneness we were born with in relation to God. In a sense, redemption is actually restoration of primal oneness, which is why the early Church said that the ability to say *Abba Father* was *the* sign of redemption. This is how Saint Paul describes the matter in the eighth chapter of Romans. He speaks of our no longer having a spirit of slavery that is characterized by fear, but having "a spirit of sonship/daughtership which enables us to cry "Abba, Father." This is literally undergoing a change of heart in which one's set of feelings for God is replaced by another set of feelings.

This word, *Abba*, is immediately connected by Paul to *Father*, and by Jesus in his model prayer to the One who is "in heaven," meaning the One who is beyond, over, and above all else in life.

What does it mean to pray to one that is over and above all in life? It means to acknowledge a Power that is greater than our own. It means to recognize God as utterly different than we. *His ways are not our ways and His thoughts are not our thoughts* the Psalmist reminds us. To think of the God "who is in heaven," is to remind us that a power greater than our own is at work in the world. It is easy for us to get bogged down and to think that certain situations and relationships are utterly hopeless and impossible. But these four little words

are to remind us of the One “who is able to do exceedingly abundantly beyond all that I can ask or think.” So who are we to use words like “possible” or “impossible?”

Thomas Wolfe once said: “The deepest search in life is...for a father; not merely the father of our flesh, or youth...but the image of strength and wisdom external to one’s needs and superior to one’s hunger.

A story is told in the Old Testament book of II Kings 6:14-19. The Syrian army slipped in one night and surrounded the place where the prophet Elisha was sleeping. When his young servant awoke the next morning and went out and saw the enemy forces in all directions, he was frozen with fear. In panic, he rushed in to apprise the prophet of this situation, but Elisha was not upset at all. He said quietly: “Fear not, my son, for they that are with us are more than they that are with them.” Then Elisha dropped to his knees and prayed: “Lord, open the eyes of this young man that he may see things as they really are.” Suddenly, the scales fell from the servant’s eyes and he saw in the mountains back of the Syrians a whole host of horses and chariots encompassing them. The resources that were with them were more than the resources that were arrayed against them. And this is what it means, functionally, to pray to an “*Abba-Father* who is in heaven.”

Our hungering heart for a father / mother that is above and beyond all is met in Jesus’ image of an *Abba-father* in heaven. When this vision of God becomes our vision, personal redemption has begun. So may it be.

Isaiah 61:10-62:3

10I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. 11For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

1For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch. 2The nations shall see your vindication, and all the kings your glory; and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will give. 3You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.

Galatians 4:4-7

4But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law,⁵in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children.⁶And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!"⁷So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.