

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

12th Sunday after Pentecost
Year C

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Text: Matthew 6:9

Title: “The Prayer of Jesus: Abba”

When I was studying history at Northern Michigan University, one of my first classes was with Dr. Jon Sari. Dr. Sari was a Yale grad who had lived in China for several years learning about their history and culture. His lectures were deep and rich, full of stimulating knowledge and balanced with personal experiences that he shared freely. As a young student I found him to be a bit intimidating. His knowledge was so much deeper than mine, his experience so much broader than mine. Because I respected him so much, I called him by his rightfully earned title: Dr. Sari.

I remember clearly the first paper I wrote for him. Thinking I was an adequate writer because I'd received A's in my previous English classes, I worked hard on that paper and expected a decent grade, but when he returned it, it had a large “C-“ written at the top. I was crushed. There were notes throughout written in the margins. Dr. Sari, it turns out, was interested in teaching students how to write well in his history class. I went to see him after receiving that paper and he graciously talked with me about improvements I could make in my writing. The next paper I wrote I did better, a “B-“. A paper a week we wrote for him during that semester and by the time the class was finished I was writing “A” papers.

He was such a great teacher that he met with every student before giving out the final grades for the semester. When he met with me he took all the papers from that semester and compared them and told me that because of the improvements made from the first to the last, he was giving me an “A” for the course. I was so grateful and elated when I left his office that I was on “cloud nine”. Still, he was Dr. Sari to me.

However, I noticed there were classmates that routinely and casually called him “Jon” which I just couldn't do. He and I had a conversation about that once. The history department had a year-end party at one of the professor's homes. I went, and Dr. Sari and I bumped into one another. I thanked him for teaching me so much that semester. I also confessed that I'd noticed that some students called him by his first name but I couldn't bring myself to do so. Something about honoring his experience and knowledge wouldn't allow me to address him casually. Something about respecting him as my teacher wouldn't free me up to call him Jon. He was on a different level than I was, and I thought he deserved the title Dr. when I addressed him.

How we address people says something about how we feel about them, doesn't it? The names or titles we use when we converse with someone set the stage for our relationship with

them. If that is true, then what difference does it make in how we address God? How can the names we use for God affect our approach to God?

This first Sunday of the series on the Lord's Prayer focuses on how addressing God in prayer is a way of defining our relationship with God and models for us relationship with others.

When Moses had his burning bush experience and God called him to free his brothers and sisters from slavery in Egypt, Moses **asked**:

“If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” ¹⁴ God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.”^[a] He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” ¹⁵ God also said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘The LORD,^[b] the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you’. (Exodus 3:13-14).

One of the things I learned from our Hebrew teacher, Father Bauer, was that for Jews, God's name is so holy—so sacred--that when they come to passages in the scroll that contain God's name in Hebrew, “Yahweh”, they cannot speak it. And so instead of “Yahweh” or “I am” or “I am who I am” they say “Adonai”.

When the disciples observed Jesus going off to pray, they wanted to learn themselves how to relate to God as Jesus did and so they asked him to teach them. And the first thing Jesus tells them is how to address God: “Our Father in heaven”. Not “Our General in heaven”. Not “Our Task Master in heaven”. Not “Enforcer” or “President” or “Senator” or “CEO” or “Dictator” or “Emperor” or “Caesar” or “Leader” or even “Teacher”. “Our Father in heaven”.

The Word “Abba” is Aramaic which is a language that was--for centuries--part of the mix of languages in the Middle East. It is used only three times in the New Testament and every time it is used, it is set alongside the Greek, “ho pater” or “Father”. The Apostle Paul used it in his letter to the congregation in Galatia (4:6) and in Romans 8:15 where he writes according to the version, The Message:

¹⁵⁻¹⁷ 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?” [(“Abba”)] God's Spirit touches our spirits and confirms who we really are. We know who he is, and we know who we are: Father and children.

In Mark's Gospel “Abba” is used by Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane before his arrest as he prays: “Abba, Father all things are possible to you. Take this cup from me. But not what I will, but what you do.”

When the disciples ask Jesus to teach them how to pray, he begins with the address:

“Our Father in heaven”.

To call someone “Father” implies an intimacy, doesn’t it? I mean you don’t walk up to a stranger and call them father, unless perhaps you are Roman Catholic and see a priest you don’t know walking down the street. For most of the rest of us, we don’t just address anyone as Father. For most of us Father implies that parenting is involved.

In the Gospel According to Luke, Jesus’ teaching on the Lord’s Prayer is followed by additional teaching about prayer and how to relate to God. In that follow up teaching Jesus says to his disciples:

¹¹ Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for^[e] a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? ¹² Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? ¹³ If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit^[f] to those who ask him!”

Now there are parents out there who do not give good gifts to their children. We know the stories and they are heartbreaking, but those parents are not models for the way in which our “Abba in heaven” treats us or wants us to be treated. Jesus demonstrated with his life and his love that “Abba” is a heavenly Parent who knows how to give good gifts to children.

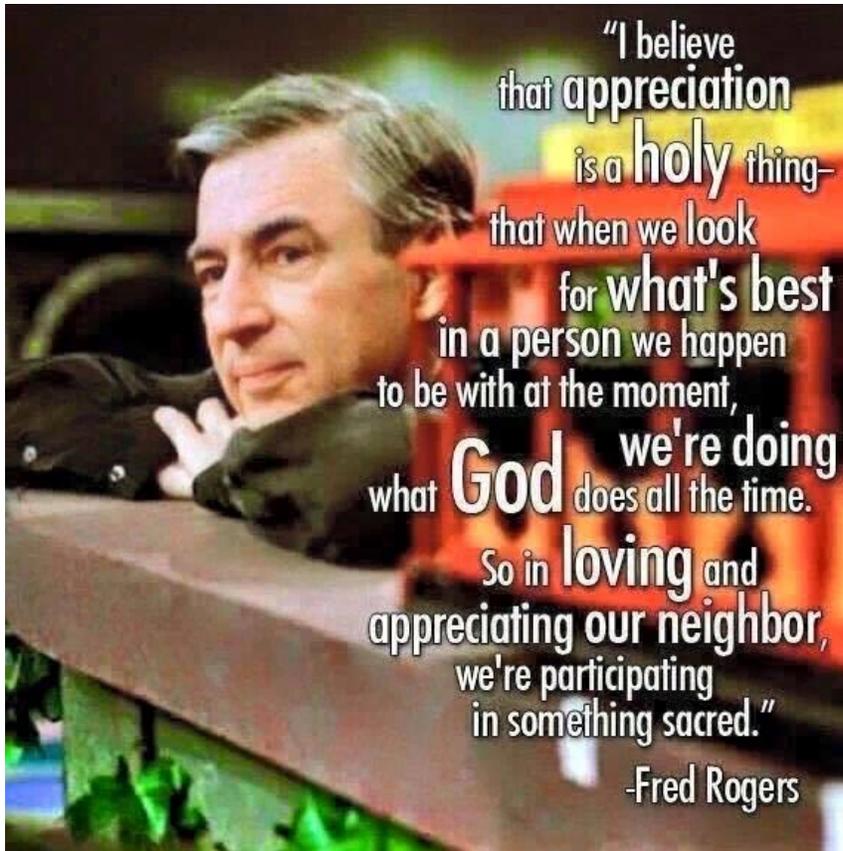
Yesterday we celebrated the marriage of Jenn Putnam, our administrative assistant, and Chris Williams. Together they choose two a couple of passages of scripture for their ceremony. One of them came from the prophet Jeremiah in which it is written:

“For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope” (29:11).

Parents who care about their children, parents who are healthy themselves, think this way about their children. They want what is best for their children. They have positive hope for their children. They want peace for their children. They want to give them a future and a hope.

This is the kind of heavenly Parent to whom Jesus taught his disciples to pray. “When you pray say, ‘Our Father in heaven’[, One who loves you, One who wants you to have a future and a hope.]”

This last week someone posted on Facebook a quote by Fred Rogers. This is the slide:



“...when we look for what’s best in a person we happen to be with at the moment, we’re doing what God does all the time. So in loving and appreciating our neighbor, we’re participating in something sacred.”

Do you believe that? That God looks for the best in you all the time? A good parent does that, doesn’t she—looks for what is best in her children? Consider, then, the next time you pray that “Abba” is looking for the best in you. Consider, then, that “Abba” knows how to give good gifts to children like you. Consider, then, that “Abba” holds for you “...thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.”

This really matters because how we address God, how we experience God, makes all the difference in how we relate to God. When we experience God as “Abba” we don’t need to worry so much. We don’t need to be fearful when we trust that our Heavenly Dad has our back, has our good in mind, even when we fall or fail or get hurt or get lost. So “When you pray, say, “Our Father in heaven.”