

May 29, 2016  
Rev. Dr. Tom Blair

**God the Father Almighty**

Matthew 6:7-15  
Second Presbyterian Church, Baltimore

**Summer Sermon Series: The Apostles Creed: Deeper than Words**



Of all the sermons of this Sizzlin' Summer Sermon Series, you might think that this should be the most straightforward, with 'God the Father Almighty' as the theme, but it just might not be. This could be the most; how might I put it, internally contentious sermon of this season.

Of course, you'll be the judge of that, anyway.

Today's message, still getting started in the Creed, begins to cut into the way that we might simply repeat the words of the Creed by rote, and not let the syllables pass through our brains or our hearts on the way out of our mouths.

For the truth is that this may be the most personal part of the entire Creed: it has to do with our father; a person with whom we've had either a wonderful relationship, a horrible one, or none at all; absent any experiences — and all of the possible gradations in between.

Now, after having served here for a dozen years, I know some of your stories, that your experiences together span the spectrum of relationships with fathers and fatherhood. So it may well be that you can't see the forest for the trees; that is, through your own lens of life you can't draw on your own experience of having a Father as being helpful or positive. There are plenty of exceptions, of course, and I know many of those, too. Yet there are Father issues we all deal with, one way or the other. Such is life. Trust me, I know how it goes. We can't change what we can't change.

So I hope that as we work our way through this, we can begin to put our personal stories in the context of God's larger story.

Having acknowledged this, I am also aware of some personal opinions you may have about the Apostles Creed, from questions that have come my way about it through the years.

I have been asked... "Should I say the words when I don't understand what they mean or why they are important, and when I'm pretty sure I don't agree with them?" "Is the Creed a litmus test; do I have to say it to be a Christian?"

What I know for sure is that saying the Apostles' Creed doesn't magically make you a Christian, and having second thoughts about what is said is only human; that's why we're doing this Sermon Series in the first place.

The Creed begins by declaring faith: belief in "God the Father." When we say these words ourselves, we follow in the Jewish tradition of Jesus. After all, these are words Jesus gives us in what we call The Lord's Prayer. Jesus mostly spoke to relatively poor fishermen and peasants who lived in a social framework where a father was responsible for providing food and shelter as well as love and support to his children. Jesus' first hearers readily understood when he spoke to them of God as a father watching over his children, as a father whose child asks for bread, or an egg, and he gladly gives them what they need. (By the way, Jesus, just the same, used a wide variety of names for God, images beyond the masculine; Mother Hen, Comforter, Door, Light of the World.)

Perhaps the most compelling image of Fatherhood Jesus shares is in the story of the Prodigal Son, in which the Father's relationship to his sons is direct (though not always the best); yet in which the Father's love, received or not, is the main takeaway theme. It is what family love is all about, extended through thick and thin, no holds barred.

This, however, is not the setting in which the Apostle's Creed took its final shape and form.

The fact of the matter is that the birthplace of the Apostles Creed was not so much in the Jewish culture of Jesus but rather the Roman culture of the first few centuries of the Christian era. It was a very different scene than what Jesus' himself experienced, and yet, the early church stuck with Jesus' words, even as their meaning may have morphed in people's minds.

In traditional Roman society the figure of a father was not first of all a loving, doting Daddy, but rather a powerful one. The Father was the master-the *paterfamilias* - (in cinematic parlance, the 'Godfather'.)

He ruled over the family, often as a distant, impassionate figure, overseeing the entire household, women, grandchildren, servants and slaves- all who, according to tradition, paid homage and devotion to him.

So in the early church of Rome, for example, there would be many church members who themselves knew no father and whose allegiance was to the *paterfamilias*, the head of the manor, as it were (you can even think of Downton Abbey, if you like. Of course, not every Master was as kind and benevolent as Lord Grantham.) As well as being an authority figure, there was an accompanying sense of 'otherness' about this Heavenly Father, above and apart from those who confessed these words.

The takeaway here is about the positive sovereign authority of God. There is not another rival god that we pay homage to, or an intermediary god that we need to satisfy in order for the real God to hear us. And in terms of the masculinity of it all, rather than this being a divine version of 'mansplaning', processing ideas through a man's point of view for supposed purposes of validation, my take on this is that its something of the reverse.

That is, by placing God as Heavenly Father, the Creed puts all fathers in their rightful place, limiting their authority, relativizing their place on the ladder of hierarchy, and letting everyone know that we all belong to another, much larger family with a very different and much more powerful and loving head of household.

Ok, that's enough theology for now. What we need is application about what this means...and it comes in a story, guided by the image on our bulletin covers today.

In his essays on the Apostles' Creed, The Rev. James Howell recounts that around the year 1300, the Italian master painter Giotto is said to have painted a collection of frescoes in the Upper Church of the Basilica, in Assisi, that depict the life of St. Francis. In the third bay of the upper basilica of the cathedral, the moment is portrayed when Francis dramatically abandons all his worldly goods and all his ties with his father, even shedding the clothes off his back that had been given him from his youth.

His nakedness is shielded by a Bishop's cloak, and Francis' hands are lifted to heaven, waiting for God's sign of blessing. It was at this moment that Francis solemnly announced that he was no longer the son of Pietro Bernadone, but rather, as he said, "my father from now on is "Our Father, who art in Heaven." For Francis, to call God "Father" was a declaration of allegiance, choosing to serve God even if it brought his earthly father's disapproval.

Calling God 'Father' means a matter of priority, in different ways, for all of us. While at some point in our lives we may strictly obey the 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment, to Honor your Father & Mother, at some point, self-differentiation needs to take place, one way or another.

Here is a final illustration, from The Rev. Philip Newell, a church of Scotland Pastor with whom I shared a retreat a few years ago, out at Ghost Ranch, NM.

In a story that comes from the days of St. Columba, a 6<sup>th</sup> century Irish Abbot who is credited with bringing Christianity to Scotland, we get a sense of the place of God the Father Almighty in the living faith of the early Celtic church.

A young disciple named Brendan first approached Columba, now aged and wise, and the Abbot asked him "What have you come here for?"

The disciple said, "I have come seeking the truth of the Gospel."

"What a fool you are!" Columba said. "You have the greatest treasure of the world inside you, and yet you go around asking other people for help. What good is this? I have nothing I can give you."

Brendan said, "Please, tell me what the treasure is."

Columba said, "Where is your question coming from? Consider this. For *this* is your treasure! Did not our Lord say "the Kingdom of God is among you." It is precisely what is asking the question in your open heart that is so important. Everything is stored in this precious treasure house of yours. It is there at your disposal and you can use it as you wish; nothing is lacking. Why are you running away from yourself and seeking what you think only others have. You can see the truth as clearly as anyone."

Upon hearing these words, the disciple realized he had been reaching beyond where the truth resided. Filled with quiet joy, he bowed to the Abbot and departed. He now knew where his heart was leading.

In the end, when we follow the gospels, we see that even Jesus had Father issues; he did not have an easy time following through and doing his Father's will- but he did his best.

If our best is what we can do as well, then will have done well enough, indeed.

In Jesus' name. Amen.