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Our Kind and Loving Father
 Hosea 11:1-2, 8-11; Luke 11:5-13

In the Episcopalian *Book of Common Prayer*, the priest is instructed to introduce the Lord's Prayer with the words, "*Now as our Savior, Jesus Christ, has taught us, we are bold to say . . .*" Notice the word "bold!" Jesus invites us, no, that's not strong enough – Jesus summons us, even commands us to pray! In a few moments, Jesus will tell His disciples, "*Ask and you shall receive; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks will find, and she who knocks, the door will be opened.*"

When our son Erik was about six, I was vacuuming our stick-shift VW Dasher. When I go inside for a moment, he slips into the driver's seat, and starts the car, which is in gear. The car jumps forward, and somehow traps him at the entrance to the garage, with his legs under the car and the door pressed against his back. I hear him scream, "Dad, help!"

I rush out and realize that I can't back up the car without crushing his legs, or move the car forward without the door closing on him more tightly. So I scream to Mary Ann, "Call 911!" and dash to a neighbor who's washing his car. Filled the adrenaline, the neighbor and I move the car's front-end sideways, until Erik is freed. He ends up hospitalized with a bruised pancreas. The second he calls, "Dad, help!" every fiber of my being focuses on rescuing my beloved son.

That's the spirit in which Jesus bids us to pray. We pray as God's beloved children. Jesus asks rhetorically, "*If your son or daughter asks for bread will you give them a stone, or if they ask for an egg will you give them a scorpion? If you, though you are sinful, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Heaven Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask?*"

So this Christian faith of ours is not primarily a set of doctrines or beliefs. Don't misunderstand. Beliefs are important. Adolph Hitler

sincerely believed in *Lebensraum*, that Germany had the right to seize the land of other sovereign nations to give his superior people room to expand, and he sincerely believed that Jews and other minorities should be exterminated.

And this Christian faith of ours is not simply a set of ethical maxims. Again, ethics are important, for nearly every New Testament letter contains a list of very specific behaviors that should distinguish Christians from the surrounding culture,

Love is patient, even during the terrible twos. Love is kind, even when your neighbor's dog barks at 2 a.m. Love does not envy our brother-in-law's new BMW. It does not boast, when your daughter gets into Harvard. Love is not rude to the jerk who cuts us off in traffic. Love is not self-seeking or easily angered. It keeps no record of wrongs, but always protects, always trusts, always hopes, and always perseveres.

Beliefs are important! Ethics are important! And so are spiritual practices like worship, prayer, service, generosity and the meditative reading of Scripture, habits which shape us as surely as practicing the piano prepares us for playing more challenging music. But even spiritual practices are not the heart of our faith.

Jesus tells us that the heart of our faith is relationships – our relationship with God and with our neighbor in need -- *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. This sums up the law and the prophets.”* So Jesus begins the model prayer He wants us to pray like this, *“Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.”* Let's listen:

Hosea 11:1-2, 8-11; Luke 11:5-13

Like the first disciples, if we're serious about growing in faith, in our relationship with God, we must ask, “Lord, teach us to pray!” And Jesus answers with a word that is a sermon in itself, with the word, *“Our.”* Our throws cold water on our American individualism, on the notion that spirituality is just about being born again, about me and Jesus. So we don't find faith on a golf course, however beautiful the scenery. We find the faith in the company of a fallen, at times wonderful, at times dysfunctional family of sinners and saints called the church. That's why, though Jesus is with us always, He says

specifically, *“Wherever two or more are gathered, there I am in the midst of them.”*

The word “our” summons us to community, to being our brother or sister’s keeper. It is to envision a world like the 100-yard dash in a Special Olympics meet. BANG! The starter’s gun sounds. The athletes charge ahead. But then one of them falls, and all the others stop, help up the fallen competitor, and romp to the finish holding hands. Can you image? Jesus can.

An American author living in Russia reports a sad vestige of Stalinism. He finds the Russian people very friendly once you get to know them, but to strangers they keep a wary distance and distain. For after decades when simply talking with the wrong person might lead to interrogation or the gulag, Russians stay uninvolved. So, with amazement, the author sees a very serious automobile accident. Once the authorities are called, everyone walks right past as though nothing happened. That’s not being our brother or sister’s keeper!

To pray, “our” is to pray for reconciliation in Ferguson or north Champaign; to pray “our” it is to oppose Isis and every form of extremism; to pray “our” is to realize that texting, e-mails and twitter are no substitute for face-to-face contact; to pray “our” is to work to see that every single person receives their daily bread.

To pray “our” is to realize that we are all brothers and sisters in Christ. One Sunday morning in the summer of 1865, after the close of the Civil War, the Rev. Charles Minnergerode of St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Richmond, VA, offers the words of institution for the sacrament of communion, and invites the congregation forward.

To the shock of the congregants, a tall, well-dressed black man comes up first. This is unprecedented: It is post-Civil War America eclipsing the antebellum South. The congregation gasps; the minister freezes. It is one thing for the white South to accept defeat and that slaves are now free; it is quite another to serve a black first as an equal. And not just at any church, but here at the sanctuary for Richmond's elite, the wealthy, well-bred, and high-cultured.

The black man kneels, while the rest of the congregation tenses up. After an eternity, but really a few seconds, a white man rises, his gait erect, head up and eyes proud, and walks up to the chancel rail. He is exhausted and looks far older than most people remember. He kneels to receive communion beside his Christian brother. And as General Robert E. Lee takes communion, the other members come forward, with a mixture of reluctance and fear, into a new future.

Jesus teaches His disciples to pray, "*Our Father*," using the Aramaic word "Abba," which can mean "Daddy." This is how Jesus understands God. The Jews of Jesus' day pray beginning with, "O God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob," a particular prayer prayed by a particular people with a particular history. But "Our Father" can be prayed by members of "every tribe, nation, language or people," envisioning the universal throng in Revelation, where all are welcomed to the heavenly city. All who receive Christ are adopted into His family; they become part of the innumerable communion of saints, which breaks down every earthly barrier.

To pray, "*Our Father*," *our Daddy*, is to pray an intimate prayer. As I run to Erik when I hear his cry for help, our loving Father welcomes the praise, confession, yearnings and heartache of His children. I can tell my Heavenly Father about how much I miss my husband, about how hard it is to start life over in a new country with a new language, about my estrangement from my son, about my overbearing boss, about my fear of what the biopsy might reveal, about my anxiety of not getting tenure, about being bullied at school, about longing to get pregnant, or dealing with my anger towards my ex. We can pray directly to our God, without any intercessors. Our Daddy is always ready to hear us!

Jesus, of course, has an intimate connection with his Heavenly Father. When Mary and Joseph find 12 year old Jesus in the Temple after three days of terrified searching, Jesus says, "*I had to be in my Father's house.*" When He kneels in anguish in the Garden of Gethsemane, praying about His ordeal ahead – arrest, trial, a savage beating and crucifixion – He prays, "*Abba, Father, Take this cup from me. Yet not my will, but what you will.*"

But for one moment, on the cross, as He bears our sins, He experiences for the first time the alienation from God caused by sin. He prays in agony, not “My Father, but *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.”* But then, in His final earthly prayer, He recalls the prayer every Palestinian child learns to pray before he or she goes to sleep, *“Father into thy hands I commit my Spirit.”*

Some of us, of course, did not have loving Fathers, and we still bear the scars of neglect or emotional or physical abuse. Lance Armstrong speaks of his difficulty with faith because his father, a fundamentalist Christian, regularly beat Lance with a belt. So doesn't praying, *“Our Father*, evoke painful, even harmful memories. On the other hand, perhaps those of us who had painful relationships with our fathers especially need a father who is always consistent, loving and kind, a father who is described by the Psalmist like this:

O Lord, you search me and know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you know all my ways, and even a word before it is on my tongue. Where can I go from your Spirit or flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, or settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand guides and holds me fast.

For you created me; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

And some regard praying, *“Our Father,”* as patriarchal, as one more example of a male-dominated church leadership, where some churches deny women the priesthood or even leadership positions. But Jesus describes God as a woman searching for her lost dowry coin. We are born of God, and only females give birth. The prophets describe the tenderness of God as that of a nursing mother. So our recent Presbyterian confessions of faith wisely declares, *“We believe in God, who like a mother will not forsake her nursing child, and like a father who runs to welcome the Prodigal home. God is faithful still.”*

My goodness, it's taken me two sermons to get through the first two words of the Lord's Prayer. But such is the depth of meaning in this prayer that we often recite without thinking.

But let us pray boldly. Let us pray in confidence to our perfect Heavenly Father, who is ready to receive our hurts and fears, our joys and sorrows, our good, bad and ugly.

And let us pray and work for “our,” for our neighbors in need, near and far. Our faith is personal, but it is never private. It is not real unless we care for what happens in Ferguson, MO, or at the border between Israel and the Gaza Strip, or to the homeless man who walks our streets. Our faith is not real unless we welcome strangers, feed the hungry, and work for racial reconciliation. It is not real unless we practice forgiveness and point others towards our loving Heavenly Father. So each day may we pray and live the simple words, “*Our Father.*” Amen.