



LESSONS IN LIVING

Prayer – Who Am I Praying To?

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
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Scripture Reading: Matthew 6:9-13 and 18:19-20 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

We are in a series now – this is number two – we're talking about prayer. The background is that we [here, at St. Andrew's] spend a lot of time looking at political things and we spend a lot of time looking at theological things – trying to look at the world in a scientific modern framework. A great poverty of theology in our day is that people haven't taken in things like evolution, relativity, materialism . . . even liberal traditions that give lip service to these things have not done the kind of radical transformation, [such as] what does it mean to say God is 'eternal' in an evolving universe? What does it mean to say that Jesus is the 'only way', in a relativistic universe where everything is a reflection of everything else?

So what we're trying to do today, [is to] go back to prayer. What we're trying to do is have a modern mind, but also experience the 'art piece' as well . . . because these symbols were never intended to be taken literally. Great damage has been done by the church in teaching the symbols of religion as though they were historic, scientific facts. But there's also poverty from *not* understanding what the symbols are talking about, either. A great deal of my experience and your experience isn't logical. That doesn't mean you have to be illogical, but the Universe is pretty strange, and so the symbols are trying to remind us and connect us to that (strange) depth of experience. It doesn't get rid of science. You still want to be scientific wherever you can, but you also want to be an *artist*, you want to be a *poet*, you want to have value and meaning in life. So what we're going to try to do is build a bridge between that sense, that you sometimes have, of being close to everything that you have as a child, of being at one with the Universe – between that and a modern mind. That's the bridge we're trying to build.

It's hard for people to even understand what a symbol is when they've been taught such bad religion. I said a couple of weeks ago, teaching theology today is like trying to teach baseball to a bunch of people who have been beaten with the bats. Because when you hold up any part of it, you don't know who's going to cringe. When so many people have been abused by theology, it's understandable that they would "duck" when the symbols come forward. And I'm not suggesting that you need to use these particular symbols, but you need something in your life, in your vocabulary, that reminds you of what the symbols mean. We'll talk about that in just a second.

If there was a stoplight - and there is a stoplight actually - I don't mean to be hypothetical, right out there. (*points to street corner*) It's a symbol, right?, and some of it's just a convention. Red [equals] stopping, [it] could just as easily have been green. But it's really helpful to have a *common vocabulary*, a common symbol system, so we don't [run into] each other after church on the way home. It's a convention, but it points to something that's pretty important.

The two mistakes we can make about a symbol, and they're equally harmful, I believe: 1) you can *believe* them literally, or 2) you can *disbelieve* them literally. You can take the symbol literally, and think there really is a person someplace [who has] on their mailbox, "G-O-D", that there's somebody someplace that's just hiding real

good. (Nothing personal, been playing hide and seek for all eternity. And you keep groveling, and keep groveling, and maybe if you grovel enough, “Hi! Here I am! I’ll come out”) That’s pathological.

But the flip side is there’s nothing, no symbol, no vocabulary for talking about the rapturous parts of life and living – when there is no poetry that talks about how Nature feels, how unity with all other beings feels. When you don’t have that in your vocabulary, there’s poverty there as well.

What I want to suggest is three things, because it’s Trinitarian. We’re looking at this prayer that Jesus taught the disciples and today we’re looking at three words, “Our heavenly parent”. I want to suggest that very possibly that’s a Trinitarian formula, perhaps because of the limits of my mind, my brain. But I think the reason I’m lifting this up is, if we can understand what the Trinity was, it wasn’t this abstruse monstrous mathematics. It was three symbols talking about parts of your life experience. If you only have one symbol for life, you’re in trouble.

The three symbols I think behind the Trinity - it’s a vocabulary for everything that’s too big to think about, everything that’s too deep to think about, and everything that’s too darn strange to think about - and I don’t care how scientific you are, how materialistic you are, those are three realities that are very hard - I would even say impossible for your brain to deal with. You may be a scientist, but you’re a primate scientist, and the tissue of your body has needs. You cannot think about an open universe. You cannot. And so there needs to be a symbol that [serves] sort of like a place mark, that helps you realize. Have you ever had a globe? A globe is a wonderful thing that fits in your hands and it gives you a sense of closure, but it’s really opening you outward, it’s giving you a sense that you are part of this larger reality. And so you don’t fall into the mistake of thinking *your* idea, or the *church’s* idea, is the one idea that works. That’s a bloody idea that has murdered many, many people. It’s a very evil idea that churches can fall into.

But the idea that we are part of one being, and that we need to synchronize ourselves and harmonize ourselves with one another is a very beautiful thing. So there [are] things that are too big, they’re too deep. It can be very scary to think about our sources - do we come out of matter, do we come out of invisible people inventing things, molding us like clay? And then Mystery – we’ll talk about all three of these - Mystery doesn’t just mean magic, it’s talking about time. It’s talking about the process that happens at the core of your experience that is change, in and of itself. Reason cannot deal with *time* very well. Reason deals magnificently with *space* and the *relationships between things*. But getting the tune, getting the song, is something that’s going to come from your intuition, from the sinews of your being.

So we’re going to look at these three aspects of prayer and this phrase that Jesus starts with, because there’s nothing more awkward than sitting there in a room talking to somebody and you’re wondering, am I stupid, am I crazy? There’s nobody here, I’m talking to something and they’re not talking back. Or you have to grope for these, you know – “I was talking and all of a sudden, the cat knocked over the glass of milk so that was a symbol that I should uhhhh, I don’t know . . . get a cow, I don’t know.”

Jesus - and it’s not just Jesus – [uses] this word, “father”...“pater.” First of all it’s a parent, it is not just male, at least, it wasn’t in Egypt. It was a vocabulary that was there before Jesus came along and it represented the “abyss out of which we come.” We are emerging from something. If you are completely materialistic in your framework, there’s still something really weird that you need to think about and that’s that your consciousness is coming from that matter - emerging from it. So there has to be some intelligence in the matter that’s coming out and manifesting as your brain. There has to be a reason “why?” If ten mathematicians go into separate rooms, and do the same problem...they come back with the same answer. That has to be embedded in things, somehow, some way.

So when Jesus talked about that depth, he called it “parent.” That doesn’t mean that you have to be a child your whole life. See, there’s a limit in every symbol, it reveals something and it hides something...every symbol. Every symbol of religion reveals things, and hides things. The trick is, you want to see what it reveals, you

don't want to believe in what it's hiding from you. So the idea that there's a parent is simply saying you have a personal connection with your ground of being. If thinking of that as a mommy and a daddy works for you, that's great. But when mommy and daddy don't show up on time when you need them the most, it's helpful to realize that was a *symbol* of your connection to the ground of being, that you express it.

Looking for God is such a futile feeling. In Hinduism, they have a saying, *Thou art that*. I'm going to look at three of the great sayings of Hinduism today. One is "Thou art that", you're emerging from that thing you're looking for. You wouldn't be here if that deeper intelligence were not emitting you. So you don't have to look like there's a missing God someplace, like a big milk carton with a picture of "God-missing" and you're supposed to find it. You're coming from that thing that you're looking for, whatever it is. Whatever you think that symbol means. And we can't know, we can't turn and see it.

That was the great gift that Kant gave philosophy. He tore a big hole right in the middle of it. He said you cannot know what things are in and of themselves. You can only know what they're doing to you. So when you speak to me, I hear reverberations, I hear them through what's happened to me. I interpret them through my past, but that's not all there is to you. You are a mystery to me, and I have to honor that. So "thou art that" is a way that sounds arrogant, but it's not, its saying that when you display who you are, when you live to your fullness, you are emitting the sacred...like a tiger praises God by being a tiger. By being itself, by being its fullness. In the same way that when you are loving, kind, wise, gentle, creative, those are expressing the very ground of being in a very beautiful and wonderful way. So that's number one.

Number two is the idea that *all is one*. The universe is so large and so open that it overwhelms us and it terrifies us. Religion gives you kind of a sense of a horizon in which you live. Also, by thinking of a heavenly parent, it makes it easier to step out of your little context of the world, and think there might be a bigger one. When somebody [acts like] a creep, that symbol that there's a parent that loves you both equally, may help you be nice to that person when you have no personal motivation to do that at all. The symbol helps you step out of your small world and remember the world that you experience when you're complete. When you're operating 'on hold' you don't need religion. Religion is training wheels, when you're as smart as you can be, when you're as kind as you can be, you're living out whatever scripture has to teach. But how much of the time is that? The trainer wheels are important. They keep us from falling back further than we absolutely need to.

The next thing from Hindu scripture is: *This, too, is God*. That instead of looking for God as a hiding person, [you] see it in the face of the person sitting next to you. To realize that the person sitting next to you is a revelation of whatever sacredness means.

I was listening to an engineer the other day who was asked a question, "Why has the United States not moved to solar energy? This petroleum stuff is killing us, why haven't we moved to that?" He just kind of laughed. He was, I think, a corporate insider. He said, "Well, the problem is, the sun is a socialist. You can't corner solar energy. You're not going to make as much money. You're not going to be able to corner the market and jack up the price and become incredibly rich yourself."

You need a symbol that says that's not who you are. Just as the sun is a socialist, a human being should be a socialist. I'm not saying that's all you should be, but you should realize that on the world there are five, maybe now, seven billion people. So when you slice the pizza, you get one [slice] – that's how small your piece is going to be. And for one country to be taking up an eighth or a quarter of it, whatever that is at this time, is not right. To even want that, is to betray that sense of the wholeness of humankind – to even hold that up as something that you want out of life.

You find God first when you emerge, when you are creative, when you create; secondly, when you share, when you turn to a being next to you and see that as sacred.

Supposedly, in the middle ages, there was a synagogue, and it wasn't going too well. It was just dying on the vine. So the rabbi says, "I have great news for you. The Messiah's coming next week to our synagogue. And I want to invite all of you, and bring your friends, bring the village; the Messiah will be here next Sunday." So the whole village shows up and everyone is looking around, is it you? Is it you? Is it you? And finally the rabbi basically comes out, [points to each one] and says, "Yes, it's you, it's you, it's you." When you can see God in other people, the Messiah has arrived. That's what that symbol has always meant. That's what the resurrection has always meant – not a body getting up – but the disciples looking and seeing the sacred in each other's eyes.

Number three. When Jesus says, when two or more are gathered, I am there. That kind of puts to the side the personal Jesus stuff – Jesus as your personal fishing buddy, [Jesus that] fits in the pocket, [Jesus that] does what you want God to do. It's a bridge to other people so that we see the sacred in each other.

And then finally the strange one. And I understand how people would say [to] talk about mystery is to be escapist, because it's been used that way. It's been used as a synonym for magic. But what you and I know, and every physicist in the world and every astronomer knows, is that most of the Universe is inexplicable to us. To leave that out of our calculations seems to me a fairly large error. *We live and breathe a mystery*. And the greatest mystery of all is time. It beats like a heart underneath everything. There is nothing permanent. For us to realize that transcendence is the difference between a life of heartbreak and a life of creative beauty.

Sean Colvin wrote a song called "Sunny Came Home", and I've always loved that line that says "she didn't believe in transcendence". "Sunny came home with a list full of names, she didn't believe in transcendence." Have no idea what it means. But according to Wikipedia, (which is the second scripture, as we all know) (*laughter*) . . . according to Wikipedia, the whole song is about a woman who is so scarred by her past that she's coming back to burn down her house and start over again. She comes with a list full of names, she doesn't believe in transcendence.

If you look at your life without transcendence, if you don't see yourself as the change, if you see yourself as that which is changing, your wounds pile up one after another. Your mistakes pile up and become stains that you think you can't wash away. One of the most essential parts of religion and one of its essential rituals - that of baptism, [is that] you're washing it clean. You're letting it go. That's not who you are. You are the pure intent. You are the change.

Someone once said that we can know how many seeds are in an apple, but we can't know how many apples are in a seed. [Does] that make sense? We can see how many seeds are in an apple, but we cannot see how many apples are in a seed...that's transcendence. That's realizing there's something at work in you that's a much longer story than your biological life span.

A couple of weeks ago, I mentioned [that] when you were in the womb - you may not remember this - but when you were in the womb you went through the stages of evolution. Your body remembers a story that goes back into prehistory. So you can trust that the life that moved through you from the past will have something that moves into the future. It won't be this (points to body), it may not be what you want it to be, but that life will go on in a new form and the more you love life, the more good news that's going to be for you, [and] the less that you will identify yourself with what you've lost, the disappointments that you've had, the things that you can't get back from the past.

A couple of weeks ago I heard a minister say that he's tired of preachers talking about all the blessings that God has *given us*. He wants to be thankful for the things God has *taken away*. All those things that broke your heart - and some of them may be too fresh for this to be an insight - but you have lost things, that at the time you thought [it] was [like] death. And within a couple of years you're saying, "thank you, thank you." Have you ever been in a relationship and you're miserable, and the other person dumps you and you just go into

abandonment [and] fear? And you're trying to clutch on, and hold on, and then a couple of years later you're saying, "Oh my God, I was in prison. I'm so glad I'm out."

To believe in God does not mean to believe that an invisible person is there. That's not what a symbol is. If there was a God [there], you wouldn't need a symbol of God, right? God is a symbol of that [which] you can't talk about. It's too big, it's too deep, and it's too strange. When we pray, we're putting into words that connection. We're bringing to our consciousness the deep intuitions of our connections into the ground [of being], to each other, and the deep trust that, just as the torch of life has been given to us from past beings we don't know, we are passing a torch to the future in ways that we cannot understand.

"Our heavenly parent" summarizes who we are talking to – it's deeper than that. The depth out of which you come, that you sometimes forget, is your parent. You have personal ties into the Universe itself. And that parent unites you to every other. It's *our* parent, it's not just *yours*. So when you meet a stranger, you're seeing the face of God.

And if you're looking for God, the first way is to be *creative*, the second way is to *share, to trust*, and the third way may be the strangest of all, [and that] is to *trust change* - to not see it as your enemy, to give yourself fully to life, even when you see it coming to an end. Trusting that, just as you've been grateful for everything life has given you, there will come a day, perhaps, when you will be most grateful for what has been taken away.

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