Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York

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Sunday, February 5, 2012 *Choral Evensong*
The Fifth Sunday after Epiphany *at 4pm*

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Joel C. Daniels
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Sermon Series: "Lord, Teach Us to Pray"
SERMON 2: "FATHER"

In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

There's no doubt that the Lord's Prayer is the normative prayer for Christian people; it's the prayer that we recite at just about every worship service I can think of. If Christians somewhere in the world right now are praying, it's quite likely that it's the Lord's Prayer that is on their lips. When the disciples asked Jesus, "Teach us to pray," it was this that he taught them. And when he did, he began by calling on God, and addressing him as "Father," *pater*: the first word of Jesus' prayer.

This wouldn't have been customary for Jesus' community; praying to the Father wasn't the traditional Hebrew manner of address. God told Moses that his name was "I AM": "tell them I AM sent you." It wasn't taken from the surrounding Greek culture, either. We do it almost instinctively now, but that's only instinct that has been shaped by centuries of Christian prayer, and it is "Father" that makes this distinctively Christian.

There are at least two reasons this is so. First, God's name being "Father" takes us to the heart of the mystery of the Trinity, that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Second, it is implicated in our salvation through Jesus Christ. The focus on the Trinity, and on Jesus our savior, mark this prayer as uniquely Christian.

To be sure, the fatherhood of God is fundamentally mysterious; it eludes our understanding. Aquinas famously said that we can't say what God is – only what God is not – and, among the things that God is not, he is not a "big guy in the sky," as is sometimes said – the man upstairs, with a white beard, sitting on a cloud, and so forth. To paraphrase Karl Barth, when we say "God," we're not just saying "Man" in a loud voice.[1] Just as being a child of God doesn't mean that God wants us to be child-ish – Sigmund Freud to the contrary – God is not a big guy; nor is he in the sky; or at least he's

[1] In his essay "The Word of God and the Task of Ministry." Barth adopted this critique from Ludwig Feuerbach.

not more in the sky than anywhere else. These are all, fundamentally, forms of idolatry, tempting though they may be.[2]

Nonetheless, Jesus unfolds a mystery of faith in the one word with which he begins his prayer, giving us an insight into the triune nature of God. This triune nature is, obviously, different than our nature, and the nature of his fatherhood is different as well. For human beings, fatherhood, if it happens at all, is something that happens to us. A man is not a father when he is born; at some point later, though, he may become one – the birds and the bees, and so forth. Since fatherhood is something that happens though – one day it's not true, the next day it is true – you can't say that it's part of a person's essential nature. Fatherhood comes and, for some unfortunate parents, it may also go.

Not so, however, with the fatherhood of God. God didn't start off the way a person starts off, unattached and childless. God doesn't "start" at all. The begetting of the Son isn't something that he takes up one day, having run out of other things to do. Being God the Father is what he is. And, of course, no one can be a Father without having a son or daughter; that's part of the definition of Father. For God to have been Father eternally – if it is part of his essential nature – it means that there must have been a Son, eternally. And if that's true, then we can say that at no time – including some time outside of time, or before the beginning, or anything ever – never was the first person of the Trinity alone, as a monolithic, undifferentiated, One; never the kind of God that, for example, Aristotle describes: uninvolved, impersonal, and static.

This means that it's intrinsic to what it is to be God to be in relationship; to be in this eternal relationship, with the Son, through the Holy Spirit, always and forever; an eternal outpouring of love with no beginning and no ending; just a constant dynamic of loving and being loved. The revelation of Jesus calling God Father is the revelation that God is not distant, or aloof; not cold or withdrawn. God is, in his essential triune nature, intimate and involved; loving and giving.

So calling God "Father" tells us something essential about God, as inadequate as our language about it may be. But it also says something important about us, and about our salvation. When we pray the Lord's Prayer during the Eucharist, we say "In the words Christ has taught us, we are *bold* to say…" "Bold," both because we dare to speak the same words that Christ himself used; and "bold," specifically, because we are referring to God in the same way that Jesus referred to him, using that same intimate term "Father."

Yet, what right do we have to call on God as Father? It's one thing for Jesus, the only-begotten son, to call him that, but our doing so is quite another matter. It's not at all self-evident that just because God the Father is the one that Jesus calls Father, that he's also then "our father." I call my own father "father," but I'd be sort of annoyed if you did. Back off, I'd say: this one is mine; you can't just waltz in and decide that you're part of the family. And yet Jesus instructs us just this way:

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[2] Particularly vexing, of course, is the thought of God as a man, as a male. Scripture and tradition destabilize a gendered conception of God with such images as God comforting "as a mother" (Isaiah 66:13), or Hilary of Poitier's writing that the Son is born "from the womb of the Father" (in *On the Trinity*; also adopted by the Council of Toledo in 673). Thinkers early in the tradition, among them the Cappadocian Fathers, wrote as if they considered the idea of a gendered God basically stupid. Contemporary writers particularly helpful with this issue are Kathryn Tanner (*Christ the Key*) and Janet Martin Soskice (*The Kindness of God*; see also the insightful "Trinity and Feminism" in the *Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*).

"*Our* Father," he says. "Our": Jesus' father; and my father; and your father; and everybody's. For us to call God our Father is an act of the utmost audacity; it's almost indecently familiar; it's presumptuous in the extreme.

The objection of the scribes and the Pharisees was exactly the right one, and it can be – and should be – leveled against us as well: How dare you call God your Father? I would say, then, that we call on God as Father almost as an act of defiance: in defiance of our own unworthiness to do so. We are bold to say it. When we call God by name, we assert that we are sons and daughters of God through Christ. We proclaim that, because of him, our entrance fee to the Kingdom has been paid in full; that we are no longer servants, but friends; that there is a place at the table that has been set for us. By calling God by name, we go to a place that we have not ourselves earned the right to go; we speak a name that we have no right to speak; we waltz in, and decide that we're part of the family; we insist on our adoption; we lay claim to the privileges only accorded a favored daughter or favored son – though we are, in and of ourselves, neither of those.

We, who are not Jesus, through him have now become daughters and sons, just as he is. Because of him, we can call God by name; because of him, our intimacy with God is assured; our intimacy with God has even become intrinsic to God's nature, because the Son is intrinsic to God's nature, and that intimacy transcends even death – his death, and now our death – because Jesus ascended, he said, "to my father, and to *your* father."

This is what generations of Christians have found transformative in this name, "Father," this very first word that Jesus spoke when he taught them – and taught us – boldly to pray.

In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Ghost. *Amen.*