

“Our Father, Who Is in the Heavens...”

A sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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These first words of the Lord’s Prayer are so familiar to us that we might not realize how much is packed into them. But there are profound concepts here – as well as very simple ones – and there are all sorts of implications for our thought and reflection.¹ For example, we say, “Our Father,” but did you know that in the original Greek texts of the prayer this word order is reversed? It’s a small thing and it’s really just a matter of grammatical construction, but strictly speaking the subject noun comes first and the modifying adjective comes after it, so it is “Father of us.” The word for God is the first word in the prayer, and we who pray come after.

Further, we do not say “My Father,” but “Our Father,” and so we include all others in our prayer, in keeping with the question asked by the prophet, Malachi: – “Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us?” (Mal. 2:10). So the whole human race is like a single family, and God loves every one of us – the implication being that no one of us can approach Him with any personal request that might harm someone else. In other words, despite some things that are written in the Old Testament, a prayer for vengeance really isn’t appropriate. – Justice, yes, for the sake of a person’s learning and changing his ways, but anything selfish or vindictive is out of the question. Think, for example, about those times when you hear a fire siren in your neighborhood and you pray to God it’s not *your* house burning. Well, think about it: – who’s house would you rather it be? (Of course, we can pray that it is a false alarm, or that the fire fighters have quick success; we can also pray for the safety of all concerned, no matter who they are, but the point is, we are all children of the same Father, and we can’t expect Him to play favorites.)

And here’s another interesting point about the expression, “Our Father:” as familiar as it is, and despite the fact that we associate this idea with the God of the Old Testament, the references to Him as a Father are almost exclusively in the *New Testament*. In fact, you will search the Old Testament in vain for more than five or six verses that refer to Him this way. One or two are in the Psalms, three are in Isaiah, and one we already mentioned is in Malachi.

It seems, for the most part, that the Jews must have considered this term a little too common or familiar for the infinite and awesome God they worshiped. Thus the first really strong reference to Him as a father is in Isaiah 9:6, the well-known Advent prophecy that calls Him “Wonderful, Counselor, the Mighty God, *Everlasting Father* (and) Prince of Peace.” Here the emphasis is on rather distant, abstract qualities – not exactly the kind of father you and I normally think of when we use that title. Later (ch’s 63 & 64), Isaiah does refer to God as “Father” in more familiar terms, but even then the image is not one of tenderness or affection, but of creative power, judgment and discipline. So for the most part the concept of God as a loving, caring, compassionate heavenly Father is distinctly Christian, *rooted* in the Prophets and Psalms for sure, but only really *developed* in the Gospels and Epistles.

The reason for this is obvious. Whereas the God of the Old Testament was for the most part *completely invisible*, in the New Testament He is revealed as a gentle, caring *Man* in visible, tangible Human form. Yes, Jesus speaks of Himself as the Son of God, but then, speaking of God

¹ Indeed, Swedenborg from his own experience testifies that “the contents of that Prayer (generally) hold more within them than the whole of heaven is capable of understanding; also that a person finds more in it, the more his thought is opened towards heaven” (AC 6619; see also AC 6476).

as His Father, He also says “I and My Father are one” (John 10:30), and further, “He who has seen Me has seen the Father” (John 13:10), or even more insistently, “**Believe Me** that I am in the Father and the Father in Me...” (v. 11). Thus the awesome, fearsome, *distant* God of the Old Testament becomes the *intimately present*, *Personal* God of the New. Yet it is the same God, as the philosophers would say, both *immanent* and *transcendent* in this unique, Divine Humanity.

And yet we pray to “Our Father, *who is (or art) in the heavens.*” So is He here, or is He there? And why do we speak of *the heavens* instead of just heaven?

Well, first of all, the word in Hebrew and in Greek is plural, so even in the literal sense there is a concept of multiple heavens. But where *are* they? Certainly not in some remote *place* determined by time and space! In fact, as Jesus said, “the kingdom of God (heaven) is within you” (Luke 17:21). It is the realm or kingdom of the spirit, that is, the human mind. But then, heaven is not in *every* mind, no matter what we feel or think; it is in the good loves and true thoughts that we entertain, specifically those good loves and true thoughts that come from the Lord. So you can see where this is going.... the heavens where the Lord, our Father, lives, and where we can seek Him and find Him, are precisely where His love and wisdom are received by us – either in this life or in the life after death – and there are as many heavens as there are ways of receiving these heavenly qualities.

In this connection, and in preparation for the holy supper next month we are reminded of the Lord’s last supper, when He told His disciples how to prepare, saying they should follow a man carrying a pitcher of water and that he would show them “a large upper room, furnished and prepared” where they would meet (Mark 14:15). That upper room corresponds to the higher, more interior levels of the human mind, its largeness to their openness and thus affection for receiving love and wisdom from the Lord, and its furnishings to the knowledge that provides a basis for this reception. It is also like the private room the Lord referred to in His Sermon on the Mount, where He said we should go and “shut the door” when we pray to our Father “who is in secret” (Matt. 6:6), that is, in the spiritual realm hidden from worldly sight.

The point is that we will always find our Father *in the heavens*, that is, in the secret, inner world of our best thoughts and intentions, *really* the world of HIS love and wisdom *in* us.

But to tell the *whole* truth, God in all His perfection actually is far *above* the heavens! His love is so powerful it is like the sun in the solar system, and His wisdom so brilliant that it is like the light that shines forth from it. Both of these flow out from Him into every created thing; indeed they are the source and cause of creation in the heavens and on earth (DLW 83ff). But still, God in Himself *is Human* – Divinely Human – and it was in order to make that Divine Humanity *visible* to people that He revealed Himself in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. In short, as the Psalmist said, “He bowed the heavens and came down” (Ps. 18:9), clothing Himself with the stuff of the material world so that He could be in touch with finite minds, and further so that finite minds could know and understand Him as a Man and not just some impersonal Force. Even so, this was only the beginning. On a deeper level He came to experience what we experience, to confront and be confronted by every falsity and evil known to man, and so, finally, to overcome all these limitations in the resurrection – by which we can all be lifted up (John 12:32).

So what we have in the Lord of the New Testament actually is the Heavenly Father – the everlasting Father – *in defined, specific, natural human form*, yet a form that allows His infinite love and wisdom to shine forth – more and more as we appreciate what He was doing and how and

why He did it. Remember, our humanity is not defined by our appearance, our arms, legs, fingers, toes or even the health of our physical organs. It is defined by our states of mind, our thoughts and affections, in short, our wisdom and our love— all of which comes from the Divine Humanity that is *revealed* in the Lord. Remember too that Jesus said, “All authority has been given to *Me* in heaven and on earth. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that *I* have commanded you; and lo, *I* am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:18-20). Clearly in this as in the prophecy of Isaiah, the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit is *the Lord Jesus Christ* (which is why the apostles baptized into that name alone – see Acts 8:16 & 19:5).

But now we have another challenge. Why do we persist in referring to God as masculine and not feminine? Why is God our heavenly Father and not our heavenly Mother? Isn’t the image of a mother – conceiving, forming, nurturing and giving birth – just as satisfying, or even more intimately satisfying in regard to creation and our common heritage than the image of a father? As you all no doubt know, many pagan religions honor female deities, and even Christian churches these days are adopting very clever ways of referring to God in gender inclusive language, some even in distinctly female terms. No doubt this helps many women feel more validated and included in the church, and yet the fact remains that the God of our Scriptures is invariably portrayed as male, and we believe that God assumed the masculine form in Jesus Christ.

Well, as you can imagine, this is something we could discuss for hours. In the first place it is true that God always accommodates His revelations to the states of the people in specific times and cultures. So there is a temptation to think that He portrayed Himself as male merely because that is what people expected, and the only way they could have accepted Him. But actually the near east in Bible times was full of female deities, so that’s not the answer.

No, for us the answer comes from the spiritual sense of the Word, and from our understanding of the real significance of the two sexes. Very briefly this is how we see it. The male form is a form of love veiled over with wisdom, that is to say, the inner core of a man’s mind is love, specifically the love of growing wise, and the outer expression of that core is the wisdom (or what passes for wisdom) that he gains and uses to get things done. The female form, on the other hand, is just the opposite: it is wisdom veiled over with love, that is to say, the inner core of a woman’s mind is a very deep, perceptive wisdom, often hidden, often very hard for her to explain, and the outer expression of that wisdom is the love she uses to connect with others, to build relationships and so also to get things done, though what she does may be very different than the things a man wants to do (see CL 32).

Applying this to the nature *and appearance* of God, we understand that the very essence of God is love – all powerful, all inclusive, all merciful, creative and protective love, *but what proceeds from and expresses that love is wisdom* – profound, comprehensive, discerning, careful, prudent *wisdom*. And from a very practical point of view the critical use of all revelation is that God communicates His love *through His Wisdom* in the Word – both in the letter of the Word and in its living, Human form. Therefore God cannot appear to us as other than male – “our *Father* who is in the heavens.”

On the other hand, the *church*, which is intended to help us connect lovingly with God and one another, is consistently portrayed in Scripture as feminine, indeed as the mother who is to be honored in the second part of the fourth commandment. In the church we try to teach and share

the truths of the Word, but like the inner wisdom of a woman it is all for the sake of the end, which is a good, kind, nurturing and charitable life!

By the way, a significant teaching of the New Church is that the soul of every person, male or female, is derived from God through his or her father (TCR 92 & 103, AC 6716, etc.). The body is formed little by little through the nutrients provided in the womb of the mother, and the MIND or spirit is a combination of the two. But in the raising and education of a child ideally the mother and the father play equally important roles. So in the case of our *spiritual* growth our loving Heavenly Father inspires and teaches us through His Word, and our hopefully insightful heavenly mother, *the church* helps us to apply these teachings in our lives.

Now let’s review.

The familiar words of the Lord’s Prayer are simply loaded with meaning and implications. We start with “Our Father,” remembering that He is actually named first and that when we pray we must think not just of ourselves but of others who are all His children. We may also reflect on the spiritual use and meaning of the title, Father, representing a strong, masculine effort of love *going forth in wisdom* to inspire and teach us. And we may thoughtfully acknowledge that the awesome, infinite God who is “the everlasting Father” literally “bowed the heavens and came down” to reveal Himself in the form of an infinitely wise and compassionate *Man* who gives His life every day that we may be redeemed and saved. Finally, as we say “Our Father, *who art in the heavens,*” we may strengthen our resolve to seek Him not in our own ideas, not in the outward appearance of things, and certainly not in the culture of the world, but where He actually may be found, that is, in the large upper rooms of our minds which either have been or need to be furnished and prepared with the goods and truths of His Word. There He will come to meet us, and even as we pray He will answer, giving us “hope, consolation and some inward joy” (AC #2535) in the work of our regeneration.

Finally, it’s worth noting that the first *three* phrases of the Lord’s Prayer very clearly align with the first three Commandments of the Old Testament: the first in both cases identify Him, the second refer to His name, and the third refer to His kingdom, which is the peaceful state represented by the Sabbath day. And these in turn are all about the first great commandment, to love and honor the Lord. So when we begin to pray let’s not think first of ourselves and all that *we* need; after all, our heavenly Father already knows what we need (Matt. 6:32). But let’s think about Him, focus on Him, and welcome Him into all our thoughts about this worldly life, that we may be inspired and lifted up, and well prepared no matter what challenges we may face, to rest confidently in His love, His wisdom and His providence, according to His Word.

Amen.

Lessons: *Matthew* 6:5-10
Children’s talk: Our Heavenly Father First

Isaiah 64
Arcana Caelestia #2535 & 6619
or *Apocalypse Explained* #325:7-12, sel.