

“Our Heavenly Father”

A sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
Mitchellville, MD, February 21st, 2016

“O Lord, You are our Father; we are the clay, and You our potter; and all we are the work of Your hand.” ~ Isaiah 64:8

Today we begin a three-part series on the Divine Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

As you know, the New Church teachings about this differ from many in the Christian world, and set this church apart – for a lot of reasons (which we’ll get into in a moment). Yet somehow it seems we don’t spend a lot of time on the subject! Perhaps we simply take our teachings about it for granted. But recall our third lesson this morning (DLW 13) about how important it is to have a right idea of God. And notice the emphasis on this in virtually all the doctrinal works, like the *True Christian Religion*, the *Four Doctrines*, the *Apocalypse Revealed*, and so on.

Because we are so accustomed to the idea of God as our Heavenly Father we may not realize just how different our concept is from that in other churches and WHY this difference is so important. So let’s begin with the actual Biblical references to God as “our Father.” You might think that this title is applied to Him throughout the Word, but the truth is that the references to God as our Father are almost exclusively in the *New Testament*. In fact, you will search the Old Testament in vain for more than six or eight *verses* that directly refer to Him this way. One or two are in the Psalms, three are in Isaiah, and one, very similar to Isaiah, is in Malachi (2:10).

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, *Father of Eternity* (and) Prince of Peace.” Yes, this is often translated “everlasting Father,” but either way 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 judgment and power. 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 but only really *developed* in the Gospels and Epistles.

And why do you suppose this is so? Isn’t it simply because this same God in the New Testament finally *becomes a Man in visible, tangible Human form*? Yes, Jesus speaks of Himself as the Son of God, but then, speaking of God 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 14:9), 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 gentle, merciful, *intimately present* God of the New. Yet it is the same God, paradoxically as the philosophers would say, both *immanent* and *transcendent*. How can this be?

Well, we’ll get into what we call “the incarnation,” the embodiment of God “in the flesh” next week, but for now let’s think about how and why God is called “the Father” at any time.

The best place to start is probably the prophet, Malachi, in chapter 2 where he complains about the corruption of the priesthood especially, and asks, “Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us? Why do we deal treacherously with one another by profaning the covenant of the fathers?” (v. 10). Here he refers to the patriarchs of Israel, but makes the special point that we ALL have one Father, who is God, and so should treat one another as brothers. It’s a simple enough concept: God is the origin of everything, and so the term, Father, is used in a symbolic or metaphorical sense. We do the same thing when we refer to “the fathers of our country” or “the mother of invention,” or when we say “the wish is father to the thought” (Shakespeare), or “the child is father to the man” (Wordsworth). Indeed, we often forget that the whole Bible is written in the language of symbols and metaphors.

But why don’t the Jewish Scriptures refer to Him more *often* as our Father?

Well, for a start, God in all His perfection is of course Infinite! In one sense He can’t even be described in personal terms but rather as an awesome, incomprehensible Being, Energy or Force.

In that sense His love is so intense it can be likened to the burning fire of the sun in the solar system, and His wisdom so brilliant that it is like the light that shines from that fire. You can’t even look at this directly or you’ll go blind, much less get close to it, or you’ll be consumed in an instant. And yet both heat and light flow out from Him into every created thing; they are the source and cause of creation in the heavens and on earth (DLW 83ff). Even so, God is Human, but **Divinely** Human: His essence is the same love and wisdom that constitute any human life. It’s just that prior to the incarnation the only way this *essential* Humanity could *appear to people* on earth was in the person of finite humans who *represented* Him – angels, prophets or other messengers speaking on His behalf.

It was in order to make that Divine Humanity *visible* to people in all its perfection 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 Human and not just as 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 Father of Eternity, the everlasting Father – *in defined, specific, limited 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 full functioning of all our physical senses. It is defined by our emotional and intellectual intelligence, in short, our love and wisdom – 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 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, a Man.

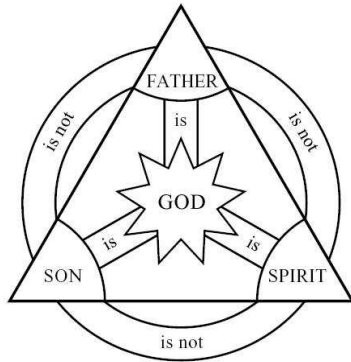
Well, as you can imagine, this is something we could discuss for hours. In the first place it is true that God always accommodates His revelations to the states of the people in specific times and cultures. So there is a temptation to think that He portrayed Himself as male merely because that is what people expected, and the only way they could accept Him as an authority. 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 seems to him like 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, 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 the letter of the Word and its living, Human form. Therefore God cannot appear to us as other than male – “our *Father* 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 in a relationship with God!

But look. In some sense everybody knows that God is our Father. The problem we have with the Trinity is the fact that the Lord in His own humanity often speaks as if He and the Father are separate and distinct beings. So the term, *persons*, is used to describe them even though it is acknowledged that God is and must be ONE. Perhaps you have seen the classic diagram of an equilateral triangle within a circle, each point of which represents Father, Son or Holy Spirit, each of which is NOT the other but all of which ARE somehow God. This is called a mystery of faith and generally speaking people are not encouraged to try to understand it. But if so it might



be said that the same person can be a father, a son, and a spirit, or that the word, person, comes from the Greek word for a mask, as in a theatrical mask, and refers to an outward appearance, not the inner reality. *But this breaks down* when it is said that the Father and Son have different natures, one that demands justice, and the other that is willing to suffer *anything* to satisfy that demand.

True, Jesus said, “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish...” (John 3:16), but if this is understood as the work of two distinct persons then what you end up with (ironically!) is a form of what psychologists call “triangulation,” that is, one party placing blame or responsibility on another in an unhealthy or “dysfunctional” way – in this case God requiring that His Son be punished for things He did not do in order to satisfy His own need for justice. It’s just not nice. Nor is it really loving, since the guilty parties, ordinary people like us, never have to take responsibility for our actions, and so never really learn from our mistakes.

Now of course the people who believe in this will say that’s just the point. There is so much actual and hereditary evil in the world that no one could possibly atone for it all, and that is why God in His mercy sent His Son to atone *for us*. Note, the whole concept is based on the notion of a *substitutionary Human sacrifice to appease the wrath of God*. So... which is it, wrath or mercy? Can the ONE infinite GOD be both wrathful and merciful? True, there is an *appearance* in the Old Testament that God is wrathful, but remember the statement, “No one has seen God at any time” (John 1:18). Until the Advent people could only see the **effects** of God’s work,¹ which included all the consequences of human evil and falsity, which make God *seem* wrathful even though in His mercy He is just *permitting* us to have things our own way.

The New Church teaching about this is that God really is ONE and that what is called the Son of God is not someone different from Himself but HIMSELF appearing for the first time in His own Human form – just as John said in referring to the Word that was in the beginning, that was “with God,” that “was God,” and that “became flesh and dwelt among us” so that we could behold His glory, “full of grace *and* truth” (John 1:1-14). In this way of understanding it the Father is like the soul in any man, only Divine, and the Son is like the body – the embodiment of that soul in visible form, and the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Truth proceeding from His mouth. Stretching the analogy a bit we might even say that similarly the constitution of the United States is the “child” of the founding “fathers.” It gives *form* to what until then was just an idea. And the spirit of it is its application to government and life. But more about these things next week.

In conclusion today, the question we all need to ask ourselves is what exactly all this has to do with us. And just so you know, the answer is – everything! First of all, if God sent His Son into the world to suffer and die for the sins of the human race, what difference does it make if we continue to sin? In fact many Christian preachers will tell you it makes *no difference*; you are saved by faith. But if He came to subjugate the hells and show us His love and wisdom so that we could co-operate with Him we have a reason to strive – with His help – to improve.

Again, if God divides Himself into two distinct personalities so that He can play “good cop” or

¹ This is just as true for Moses on Mt. Sinai as for anyone else in the Old Testament, even though it says the Lord spoke to Moses “face to face.” Cf. Exodus 33:11 & 33:20-23.

“bad cop” depending on the circumstances, and we are created in His image and likeness, isn’t this what we should do, too? If He’s indignant and wrathful shouldn’t we be indignant and wrathful, too? Is forgiveness really something that depends on others, or on some altered state?

No, the truth is God is nothing BUT love and mercy and forgiveness. He is our heavenly Father in the kindest, gentlest, most compassionate sense we could ever imagine, but He works His compassion through an Infinite wisdom that can only be expressed in the truths that *teach us how to co-operate with Him*, since, if we don’t cooperate we can’t receive His love and mercy.

That said, we do not pray to God in the name of Jesus as if He were a mediator negotiating on our behalf; we pray in His name by doing so in keeping with the qualities of His Divine love and wisdom, which is what His name represents. After all, when we pray we’re not going to get *whatever we want*, we’re going to get whatever is consistent with His love and wisdom!

So when we think of God as our heavenly Father let us think of our Lord, Jesus Christ, as He Himself plainly taught us to do saying, “He who sees Me sees Him who sent Me” (John 12:45). Let us remember Isaiah’s words from our second lesson as he said, representing the awesome God of the Old Testament,

“Before Me there was no God formed, nor shall there be after Me. I, even I, am the Lord, *and besides Me there is no savior*” (Isaiah 43:10-11).

Finally, then, let us pray that as we go about our daily business in this world we may have a living, growing sense of the creative, redemptive, merciful and wise power of our heavenly Father who wishes nothing less for us than that we truly inherit His kingdom in a life of peace, fulfillment, use and blessing – for ourselves and all who constitute the human family.

Amen.

Lessons: John 14:2-11 (with ref. to Luke 15:11-24)
Children’s Talk on Seeing Our Heavenly Father

Isaiah 43:1-13

Divine Love & Wisdom #13 & True Christian Religion #4

DLW #13

“How important it is to have a right idea of God can be established from this, that the idea of God constitutes the inmost of thought with all who have a religion, for all things of religion and all things of worship have respect to God. Also because God, universally and in particular, is in all things of religion and worship, so without a right idea of God, no communication with the heavens is possible. Hence it is that every nation in the spiritual world is allotted a place in accordance with its idea of God as a Man; for in this idea, and in no other, is the idea of the Lord.”