

Sermon for July 24, 2016 - "Prayer With God Our Parent"

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
July 24, 2016
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

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Prayer With God Our Parent

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus shows us that we can relate to the God of the universe as a child relates to a parent. Jesus tells us we can approach God with our deepest needs and can call God 'father'. And, Jesus compares God's relationship with us to that of a human parent with children. We've always said the same table prayer and had similar family dinner time rituals. But the relationships have deepened even more over the last few years as we've been spending some vacation time together on a lake in Northern Minnesota.

- I've noticed that the kids now refer to Sarah and me collectively as "the mamas" and Dan and Matt as "the dads" (though "the mamas and the papas" would be more fun) and if they need one of us they say, "where are the mamas?", or even "I need a mama" and either of us will do.
- When we were out floating in life jackets on the lake for long stretches, my daughter Abby was hanging on to the dads interchangeably; six year Stefan Nietz was doing the same with the mamas.
- The kids all felt free to openly grumble at us whenever one of us would tell them "no more sweets" or "no, you can't do any screen time, stay outside."
- They didn't seem to feel the need to be on their best behavior like they usually are around other adults and yet, the love and kindness of the other adults seemed to help them be their best selves.

I was struck by this because as a kid my family never had friendships that were that close. My parents' friends were nice people who didn't affect my life much; my friends' parents were authority figures who remained distant. I had and still have wonderful extended family but this closeness in friendship is a wonderful gift. My parents both died young and my husband's parents retired far away, so I'm grateful that my kids now have another set of parental-type relationships. They have another set of people who've seen all their faults and still love them; that they don't have to work so hard to impress; people who actively seek their well-being; that they can turn to for real help. This kind of love has made my kids more loving people.

No matter our age, we all need these kinds of relationships. I pray we all find them within our families and communities. These types of relationships are what we seek to nurture in our Christian congregations. And thankfully, we all have access to a relationship like this with God.

Jesus tells us that all of us can call God Father. (I also find it helpful to imagine God as a loving mother as God is described as a mother in scripture and God is bigger than any particular gender.) Jesus tells us that we can turn to God with our deepest needs, that we can trust in God's care and forgiveness. In God we have access to a deeply nurturing parental relationship.

This is really striking because in our first lesson we heard that Abraham came near to God in prayer with a fair bit of fear and trembling. Abraham experienced God as a distant, angry judge and approached God that way. Abraham was troubled that God was going to destroy the city of Sodom because of the violence and abuse that some people in the city had shown to guests. Abraham pleaded with God to forgive the city if even fifty, or forty-five, or forty or so on down to ten righteous people could be found in the city. This strange story shows that our prayers do influence God, that what we say matters, and that we can approach God with boldness and persistence. It also highlights how Abraham experienced God. Abraham referred to God as "Judge of All the Earth" and as he prayed to God he continually repeated, "Oh Lord do not be angry if I speak." Abraham's prayers did make a difference to God; God did listen to him. Ultimately, not even ten righteous people were found in Sodom and God destroyed the city. No wonder Abraham seemed a little nervous as he spoke to God.

Jesus shows us that we can approach God in a different way because God has chosen a different way to be in relationship with us. God has chosen to be with us as a loving parent rather than a distant, wrathful judge. God has chosen to respond to us with forgiveness and mercy rather than anger and destruction. We have a God who knows all our faults and still loves us unconditionally, a God we don't have to impress, a God who actively seeks our well-being, a God we can turn to for real help.

This is a message we need to hear over and over again because we still so often think of God as a distant judge. We experience God like I experienced other adults as a kid - nice but uninvolved, distant and authoritarian. This especially happens when it seems God isn't hearing or responding to our prayers. When we pray over and over and don't see change we wonder if our prayers really make a difference. Black people keep dying in our streets, terrorist attacks keep happening. We wonder if God cares. We wonder if we're doing something wrong and are being judged.

Jesus says, "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you". So often we feel like we ask, search, and knock for so long and nothing changes. Are we doing something wrong? Is God? What we forget is that Jesus doesn't promise that when we ask we will be given *everything* we ask for. He promises that when we ask, search and knock we will experience a relationship with God. When Jesus compares our relationship with God to a parent's relationship with a child he says, "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" The gift that God gives to us as beloved children is the Holy Spirit, the Spirit that draws us deeper into a loving relationship with God.

As we spend time in this relationship - praying for God's kingdom of peace and well-being to come, praying for daily bread for us and all the world, praying for forgiveness and for help in forgiving - we are changed. As children are shaped by the character of their parents and other parental relationships, we are shaped by the character of God. Being loved and forgiven changes us from angry judges of others to people who live with kindness and love. We become more peaceful and more able to contribute to peace and well-being in our homes, in our world. We find that we have hope and courage in the face of the brokenness and pain of this life. Today and each time we gather in worship we get lots of opportunities to live in this loving relationship with God. Most especially we get to gather around God's table to receive mercy and forgiveness. Then we are given the push to go out into the world to show that same love to others, to live as God's children caring for this world God so loves.

Thanks be to God.