

A Sermon Series on the Lord's Prayer
Part Three: "Our Father, who art in heaven"

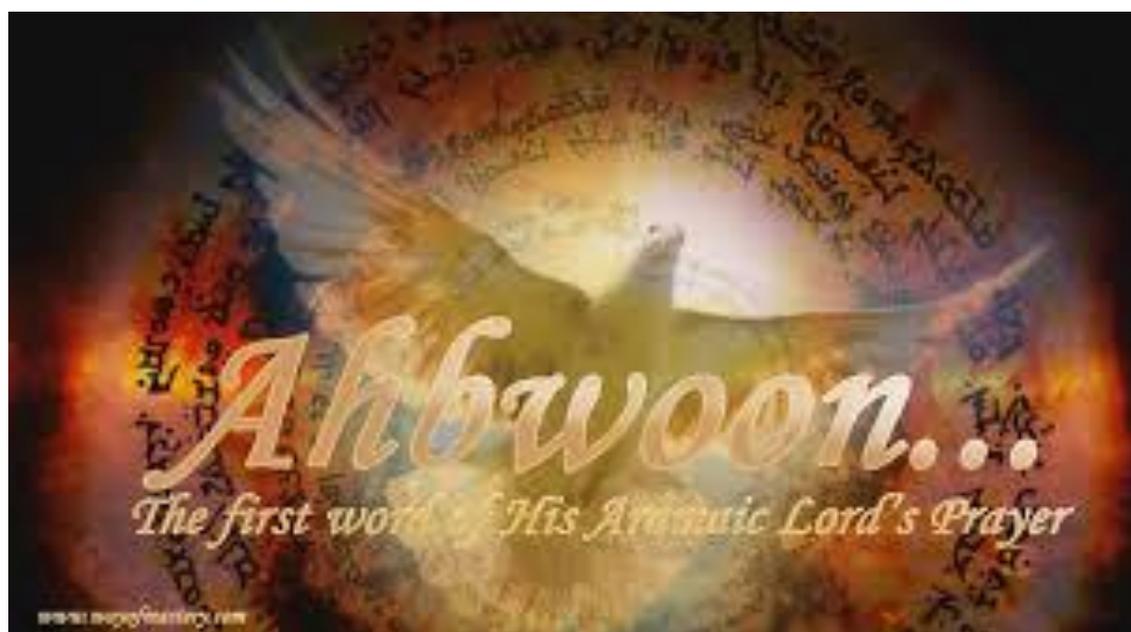
Based on Matthew 6:9

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First Christian Church

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The Lord's Prayer: The First Petition

Aramaic

Matthew 6:9 ~ *Abwoon d'bwashmaya*

New Revised Standard Version

Matthew 6:9 ~⁹ "Pray then in this way: *Our Father in heaven ...*

“Yeshua,” his disciples asked him, “could you teach us how to pray, just as our teacher John [the Baptist] also taught us how to pray?” Luke says that Jesus did not miss a beat when he replied: **“When you pray, say: Father ...”** (Lk 11:2). Matthew says that Jesus told them that this was how they were to pray: **“Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven ...”** (Mt 6:9). Every Sunday we join our voices together in our beautiful sanctuary and repeat by heart the first words of what we call the Lord’s Prayer: *“Our Father, who art in heaven.”* Today we are going to unpack what is known as the first petition of the Lord’s Prayer, which points to the very heart of our Christian faith and also indicates how we differ from other religious traditions. I hope that at the end of my message today, if you can bear with me, you will understand more fully what that is.

First, I would like us to begin with a simple exercise. Please look at the Lord’s Prayer, which is on the front of your bulletin. I would like you to look for and circle all the places where you see the words “I, me, mine.” I’ll give you a few minutes to complete this exercise. How many did you find? In the Lord’s Prayer, all words related to the individual are replaced by “we, us, and ours.” “OUR Father in heaven ...” The God we are addressing is not some personal possession of each one of us but is the God of ALL of us. With the word “our,” we join our hearts and minds and souls together as one human family, connected together through an important bond that transcends our individual families, our ancestral families, our races, nationalities, genders, orientations and identities, political persuasions, and every other kind of -ism or difference we could ever think of. We affirm our essential kinship with one another as the very first pronouncement we make in front of God and each other is “Our.” Let’s say the first line of the Lord’s Prayer together, saying the word “Our” together as though we really mean it, and pausing for a few moments to let it sink in. OUR ... Father ...

Importantly, this first petition also implies something we take for granted. Namely that there are not multiple gods but only one God. While, in 2021, we might not see this as a revolutionary concept, think back for a moment to polytheistic societies that believed that there were multiple God/desses perhaps at war with one another and controlling the elements and events on earth. Listen to what my favorite Bible commentator William Barclay says about this and, as I do so, please excuse him for using the outdated, pejorative word ‘heathen’:

“Missionaries tell us that one of the greatest reliefs which Christian brings to the heathen mind and heart is the certainty that there is only one God. It is the heathen belief that there are hordes of gods, that every stream and river, and tree and valley, and hill and wood, and every natural force has its own god. The heathen lives in a world crowded

with gods. Still further, all these gods are jealous, and grudging, and hostile. They must all be placated, and a man can never be sure that he has not omitted the honour due to some of these gods. The consequence is that the heathen lives in terror of the gods; he is 'haunted and not helped by his religion'. ...the last thing the gods wish to do is to help men. ... So, then, when we discover that the God to whom we pray has the name and the heart of a father, it makes literally all the difference in the world. We no longer need to shiver before a horde of jealous gods; we can rest in a father's love.'"¹

Let's repeat this part of the prayer together: Our Father. And it is in this word 'Father' that we come to the heart of our Christian faith as we understand that God, as our father who art in heaven, is both the spiritual force who created and sustains the heavens and earth and allows for each new breath we take, but who also is an intimate presence in our lives like an earthly father to whom there is closeness and of whom we should not be afraid.

To get behind the English word "Father" today we are going to explore the way that Jesus said this not in the Greek language into which his original words were translated, nor the Latin into which the Greek was translated, nor the English based on the Latin and Greek, but rather the Galilean Aramaic that Jesus and his disciples spoke. This is not an easy task since we are not only a few centuries away from when Jesus taught his disciples the Lord's Prayer, but we also are a few languages away from the words that came out of Jesus' mouth that day.

This is what Jesus said in Aramaic when his disciples asked him to pray, which has been translated into English as "Our Father in heaven ...": *Abwoon d'bwashmaya*. The prayer begins with the word *Abwoon*. Let's say it together. (*Abwoon*). Now I want you to draw out the "oo" sound. (Abwoooooon). Do you sense that you have entered into a whole new linguistic world? I mentioned during part one of this sermon series that Aramaic is a language that is quite different from the more scientific Greek or German. It also is quite unlike English. It is a language in which certain letters and sounds carry specific meanings within the words in which they are embedded.

And these sounds have vibrational levels that allow you almost to feel in your body in a visceral way what a word means. So let's say "Abwoon" again together, allowing the "oo" sound to extend outward. *Abwoon. Father.*

¹ William Barclay, *Matthew, Vol 1*, p. 200-201.

Now let's break this word down into its individual parts.

A: is the ancient sacred sound. A, we know, is the first letter of the Aramaic word for God, which is *Alaha*. It is neither male nor female but is beyond all gender and all categories. "A" refers to the divine Unity or Oneness that is both beyond and also is the creative source of all that is. We might refer to "A" as the divine unity that gives birth to all that is.

bw: refers to giving birth, to the rays that emanate out from the divine source to all being. Even as we say the sounds bw, we notice that we must push this sound out of our mouth, as though we are creating or giving birth to something.

oo: When we say the sounds "oo" we see that we are creating breath that can carry something. This sound refers to a flow or creation or blessing.

n: the last sound. Do you note that you can't push that sound out of your mouth. It is a stopping point as the creative energy that is released from the divine unity is birthed outward, flowing as a kind of breath or wave moving forward, and then it stops and creates a specific form. In the phrase "in the beginning God created the heaven and the earth" we might think of the "n" as relating to the specific elements of all of these.²

When we say the Aramaic word "*Abwoon*" intentionally and as we focus on the individual sounds as we string them together we can get a sense of the actual creation of the universe starting with the "**A**" of the divine Oneness and unity, through the "**bw**" that relates to the birthing sound, to the "**oo**" of the divine breath that is the actual creative process itself, ending with the concrete form of that which is created in the "**n**". Let's say it together: A –bw-oo-n. How does that feel to you? To me it's pretty amazing. When we say "Our Father" (*Abwoon*) in Aramaic we also move beyond gender to the divine parent who births and blesses all that is as we are swept back into the mystical wholeness of the universe.

Abwoon d'bwashmaya. "Our Father in heaven." Let's look very briefly at the second part of this sentence: *d'bwashmaya; in heaven*. For many of us, especially when we were children or if we have a more literally understanding of the English words (and that is okay too!), we might think of heaven as something separate from earth.

² Neil Douglas-Klotz, *Prayers of the Cosmos*, pp. 13-14.

In Sunday School, children often will draw the earth on the bottom of the page and then draw a line far above the earth and clouds about ¾ up the top of the page. On that they will draw a grandfatherly like looking man, usually with a long white beard, in the center, with angels with halos around him.

But in Aramaic the word *d'bwashmaya* does not refer to this kind of heaven that is divorced from earth. To understand Aramaic, we always need to look at the central root of a word. The root of *d'bwashmaya* is found in the middle: *shm* (*shem*). This is a very important root in Aramaic that could be a sermon in and of itself. All I want us to see here is that this root, *shm*, can mean light, sound, vibration, name. The *aya* at the end indicates that this light, or sound, or vibration, name is the center of all activity as it emanates outward. In other words, that which we call God our Father is not just located in the sphere we Christians think of as heaven, a separate place where we go when we die and where Jesus and the angels live, but heaven—*d' bwashmaya*—is literally everywhere. *Shm* is the entire universe. God is not just in the heavens above but is within all light, all sound, every vibration, every name, in the tiniest atom, even closer than our own jugular vein. Heaven is not some far off place but right here within us, without us, here right now.

Abwoon d'bwashmaya. Our father in heaven. That is how it has been translated into English. But the Aramaic scholar Neil Douglas-Klotz says that more precise translation might be: “*O Birther! Father-Mother of the Cosmos, you create all that moves in light.*”³ Another Aramaic scholar has translated it as “*O cosmic Birther, from whom the breath of life comes, who fills all realms of sound, light and vibration.*”⁴

Yet there is even more richness and depth to come. To get at this I want you to think about the words *Abwoon* and *Abba*. Jesus called God “*Abba*,” an intimate form of the word Father that might be translated as Daddy, Dad, Papa, when he was at his most vulnerable, contemplating his death in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:36).⁵

Abwoon / Abba. Do you notice that they share the common root of “Ab.” As I already stated, the “A” sound is the originating sound of the universe and is used to signify God in many languages and religious traditions.

³ *Prayers of the Cosmos*, p. 12.

⁴ http://www.thenazareneway.com/lords_prayer.htm

⁵ He said, “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.” (Mark 14:36)

Alaha is God in Aramaic. *Allah* is the Arabic word used by both Christians and Muslims for God in the Middle East. Wayne W. Dyer in his book *Getting in the Gap*, which uses the Lord's Prayer as a form of meditation, reminds us that the "sound *ah* within the name God is the same sound around the world. We find *ah* in *Allah*, *Krishna*, *Jehovah*, and *Ra*, for a few examples."⁶ And the Buddhists and Hindus chant and pray to God using the sacred Sanskrit word of OM. When we English readers see OM written we think it is pronounced O (long O) M. But it actually is pronounced with an *Ah* sound at the beginning: AH-UM.

This *Ah* sound in *Abwoon* reminds us of the unknowable side of God, who is the creative process underlying all that is, the divine unity behind all things that gives birth to all that is. Many religions, such as Buddhism, stay at the place of this more impersonal God. And many today even think that this is a higher form of religion, superior to Christianity. I beg to differ. In fact, one of the greatest contributions of Christianity is that it moved our understanding of God from more of an abstract principle, the divine Unity behind all that is, a sovereign God of whom we might be afraid, to a personal God, whom we can address in familial terms as *Abba*, Father, Daddy. And knowing God not only as "*Abwoon*" but also as "*Abba*" is so comforting since many of us can feel so alone and even orphaned when we do not have something we can conceive of in personal terms and as being close to us. We all want and need a loving father.

Rev. Dr. Fred Craddock, the recently deceased Disciples of Christ minister, was born not far from here in Humbolt, TN. He became one of the great preachers of our times and also was a professor of theology at Emory University. He is credited with this widely circulated story that has become a classic called "Who's Your Daddy?" I share a version of it here, which begins with Rev. Craddock and his wife Nettie going out for dinner while on vacation in the Smoky Mountains in a restaurant near Gatlinburg, TN.

After ordering breakfast at a local restaurant, the couple waited for their meal, hoping to enjoy a few private moments together. When they noticed a distinguished-looking, white-haired gentleman moving from table to table, visiting with the guests, the professor leaned over and whispered to his wife, "We came here to get away from the crowds. I hope he doesn't come over." But sure enough, the man soon stopped at their table.

"Where are you folks from?" he asked in a friendly voice.

"Oklahoma," they answered.

⁶ *Getting in the Gap*, p. 31.

“Great to have you here in Tennessee,” the stranger said. “What do you do for a living?”

“I teach at a seminary,” he replied.

“Oh, so you teach preachers how to preach, do you? Well, I’ve got a really great story for you.” And with that, the gentleman pulled up a chair and sat down.

At that point, the professor silently groaned and thought to himself, “Great. Just what I need . . . another preacher story!”

Pointing out a window, the man continued. “See that mountain over there? Not far from the base of that mountain an unwed mother gave birth to a son. At age six, the mother had such a difficult time, she placed the boy in an orphanage. He had a hard life in his early years because just about every place he went, people asked the same question: ‘Young man, who’s your daddy?’ At school, the boy often hid from his fellow students during recess, and almost always sat alone while having lunch. Because ‘the question’ caused so much pain, he avoided going into local shops. Although he attended church regularly, he always arrived late and stepped out early. When he was about 12 years old, a new minister at his church gave the sermon. The benediction happened so fast that the boy got caught in the aisle and had to walk out with everyone else. When he reached the exit, the new minister, not knowing anything about the young man, put his hand on his shoulder and asked, ‘Son, who is your daddy?’

“When some members of the congregation heard the question, they became deathly quiet, knowing that the young man was embarrassed. By the sheepish looks on the faces of those within earshot, the minister realized his mistake and, using discernment that only the Holy Spirit could provide, quickly recovered... ‘Wait a minute! I see the family resemblance. You are a child of God.’ With that he placed his hand on the shoulder of the young man and said, ‘Boy, you’ve got a great inheritance. Go and claim it.’

“That young man was never the same again,” the stranger continued. Whenever anybody asked him, ‘Who’s your daddy,’ he’d answer, ‘I’m a Child of God.’ Isn’t that a great story?”

The professor, by then genuinely interested, responded, “It really is!”

As the older man walked away, he remarked, “You know, if that new preacher hadn’t told me that I was one of God’s children, I probably never would have amounted to anything!”

The professor, deeply moved by the experience, called his waitress over and asked, “Do you know who that man is?”

The waitress smiled. “Everybody around here knows that man. He lives just down the road. That’s Ben Hooper, the former governor of Tennessee!”⁷

When we gather and say in English “Our Father who art in heaven,” we are called not only to think of **Abwoon**, or the genderless Unity that is the divine source of all being and is present with us right here and right now, but also of **Abba**, Father, Daddy, the one with whom we have a relationship that is intimate, tender, trusting, close as we remember that each one of us is an important and irreplaceable royal Child of God. So let us today remember both meanings of the word as we join our voices together with the disciples of old who, when they asked Jesus how to pray, replied:

Abwoon d’bwashmaya. Our Father in heaven ...

⁷ By Gary Wade, based on Fred B. Craddock, *Craddock Stories*, pp. 156-157. In: <https://cityviewmag.com/a-preachers-tale>