

## **Ash Wednesday - Our Father**

Matthew 7:9-11; 1 John 2:28 - 3:3; Genesis 32:9-12,22-31

This [smartphone] can be a great communication tool. More and more studies are showing that it can also be a terrible distraction tool. Just think of the last time you walked into a room and you didn't see someone on their phone. Sometimes you can be in a crowded room and there are more people looking down at their screens than the people engaging with each other. That doesn't change the original intent and purpose behind this invention.

If you think about that, you can appreciate what a tremendous gift God has given to us in prayer. God gives us prayer as an amazing tool for communication with him. He invites us to use the gift of prayer as a great way to deepen our relationship with him. He wants us to take advantage of all the privileges that come from being his children. And prayer is toward the top of that list of advantages. And in contrast to smartphones, prayer isn't something we really risk misusing or abusing.

If anything, our under-appreciation stems from not fully valuing what we have and under utilization of prayer comes from not truly acknowledging who is on the other end. And so when Jesus teaches us the nuts and bolts of prayer, he begins with these simple words: "Our Father." We aren't addressing some far off, distant supernatural being. We are calling out to our daddy. We are approaching the one who cares for us tenderly. We boldly, confidently, and persistently pray to "Our Father in heaven."

We can all recognize things aren't always perfect between parents and children. And there is a reason why on Ash Wednesday, for the kickoff of our midweek Lent services, we are focusing on the first part of the prayer. It really comes down to a relationship. A healthy prayer life depends on a healthy relationship with God. Problems and shortcomings in our communication with God are usually just symptoms of deeper issues in our relationship with our Father in heaven.

That's why I want to introduce you to Andrew. As a boy, Andrew felt like he was a disappointment, like he was never good enough for his father. He thought his lack of athletic abilities prevented him from getting his father's approval. Neither did he ever get the grades that would be able to make his father glow with pride. Andrew recognized he didn't have the looks or personality to be super popular. As a result, he lacked confidence. And that spilled over to the way he imagined his father looked at him.

He felt this growing distance between himself and his father. It's not that his father ever put him down or made fun of him. His father never unleashed abusive wrath against him. And it's not like his father ever threw him out or turned his back on him. But Andrew always sensed this strained relationship. That tension he detected in his relationship with one of the most important people in his life caused him more and more heartache. So he decided to protect himself. At first he just started to do his own thing, trying to be true to himself. Then he went a step farther, going out of his way to surround himself with friends he knew his dad wouldn't approve of, getting interested in hobbies his dad would object to, dressing and talking in the exact opposite way his dad would want for him.

Still, there was nothing specifically his father did to push him or alienate him or make him feel any less part of the family. But when his actions caused more friction it just made him feel more isolated from his father. Then it even made him feel like he was incapable of being around his father. So he left. He ran away. He went out on his own to do his own thing. He had to be away from his father's watchful eye and disapproving glance. He had to distance himself from the regret and guilt that were eating himself up inside.

So out of range of his father, without disclosing his location to his father, he could finally be himself. He dove into every pursuit that would run contrary to his father's way of life. He tried everything. He did what he wanted. He chased after money. He chased after popularity. He dove headlong into pleasure and giving in to all of his desires. But none of it really filled the whole inside of him. Nothing could replace that relationship.

And he came to realize that he actually missed his father. And so he called him. It doesn't matter if he is down to his last pocket full of chance, completely out of options. It doesn't matter if he is comfortable or wildly successful in all his pursuits. He finds that one rare pay phone with the phone book ripped out and graffiti scrawled on every surface. He picks up that phone. He dials the number. He takes a deep breath and waits to hear the voice on the other side. And on the other end is his father. Of course he is. His father was always there.

Andrew is you. And Andrew is me. Andrew is every human being created by God the heavenly Father, designed to have a wonderfully loving relationship with a God who loves us and cares for us and wants nothing but the best for us.

And your Father has been there all along. He has been heartbroken at your efforts to distance yourself from him. He has watched with tears in his eyes as you run away from him, wondering if He could be a truly loving Father if he forced you to stay, if he kept you where you really belong. He sighs in anguish as you try other suggested remedies, sample alternate spiritualities, turn your life from one direction to the next while ignoring him the entire time.

All your Father has wanted was to hear from you. He wants you to reach out for him and call on his name.

So often we have foolishly neglected God's great gift of prayer. Some days it is arrogant rebellion that pushes us away from our Father. Some days shame and guilt make us sheepish and reluctant. We know how we have created this conflict with our Father, with the people around us, inside our own hearts. We look on that damaged relationship and keep our distance.

But God says to you, 'You are my child.' 1 John 3:1 says it this way: **"See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!"** He calls us his children because we are. Not could be his children if we get our act together. Not that we might attain the status as his child if we work hard enough. No, God adopts you into his family. He claims you and put this name on you and calls you his own. By faith in Jesus Christ, you are God's child.

Whatever you have done to your relationship with your Father, Jesus restores it. Whatever damage you have done by neglect or by disobedience, Jesus restores harmony. Whenever you struggle with how you have disappointed your Father, when you realize how badly you've let Him down, when you come to grips with how miserably you have failed to measure up, Jesus provides all the approval, all the acceptance you could ever need through his own life and death. Jesus robes you with his righteousness. Christ crowns your head with hope. Jesus gives you the inheritance of an eternity with your Father.

And so God gives you the gift of prayer to celebrate your relationship with Him. He instructs you, commands you, begs you to pray and enjoy the restored relationship you have with your Father. Jesus puts things in perspective: **"how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!"** (Matthew 7:11) When you are in need, call on your Father. Martin Luther puts it this way in the Large Catechism: *"God therefore wants you to lament and*

*express your needs and concerns, not because he is unaware of them, but in order that you may kindle your heart to stronger and greater desires and open and spread your apron wide to receive many things.” (LC, par 27)*

God gives you something more than an occasional text or a regularly scheduled weekly phone call. God speaks to you in his Word. God gives you the words and the content you can use to reach out to him. God gives you the pattern and the approach when you are confused. And your prayers aren't worthy because of what you've done for God, but rather because of his command to pray and his promise to hear.

And God is more acceptable than your smart phone. You will always have a connection. You will never have a dropped call. You will never run out of data or be charged with any fees. Your direct line to your heavenly Father is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week, any time and any where you need to talk with your Daddy.

And so we make communication with our Father our regular habit. We teach children as soon as they are able to sit still to say “amen.” Then they join us to ask Jesus to come and bless our mealtime and be with us at bed time. And whenever anything affects us, we turn to our Father. Whenever we are aware of what the people around us are going through, we bring their concerns before our Father. We pray boldly, confidently, persistently.

God is your loving, gracious Father. Embrace your relationship with him through the merits of Jesus by taking advantage of his generous privilege of prayer.