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## THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH OF GETHSEMANE

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### Sermon for 28 July 2013

**The Rev. Theo Park**

To put it simply: Yowch.

Where do I go with this gospel?

I'll tell you I spent most of the week quietly cursing the evangelist.

Luke may have been a brilliant story-teller, but sometimes he was a lousy editor.

Which is why we have three diverse teachings on prayer crowded together with very little thought about the plight in which this puts the poor preacher.

It would take us a month of adult forums to thread through

all of the background and theological application found in these verses.

So again, where do I go?

Well, first I'm going to limit my losses and address only a very small portion of it.

One verse, in fact. Really, one word.

Then I'm going to fall back on that time-honored preacher's aid: someone else's idea.

A quick look at context to start, however, and two primary concepts.

As part of the introduction to the scene, the disciples ask Jesus to teach them to pray.

Jesus' disciples are evidently expected to pray differently than John's disciples.

This suggests an identity moment:

as followers of Jesus we are to be defined by our prayers.

That's the first underlying concept I want to emphasize.

The second concept is a kind of corollary, namely

that this prayer is intended to be communal, rather than personal.

It was given as a prayer to define "us," not as an expression of individual piety apart from the life and worship of the community.

John Dominic Crossan calls this "The Greatest Prayer."

In fact, that's the title of a book he published on it two years ago.

In that study Crossan pays particular attention to the opening phrase of the prayer.

As it has come down to us in English, the first line begins, "Our Father..."

I'm sure you know that in Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke, it begins "Abba,"

which is what a child would say to her father, to his father.

Crossan maintains that the earliest form of this prayer was simply this:

"Abba, the Father."

I've seen the word Abba variously given as equivalent to "papa" or "daddy,"

the point being that it establishes both the intimate relationship that Jesus had with God, and the intimate relationship that we, who pray this prayer, also have with God.

We are people who have a parent/child relationship with the Ground of All Being.

This is part of the identity-shaping character of the prayer.

But of course, living in an age of post-feminist awareness, we also know that there are those for whom the image of God as “Father,” however intimately nuanced, is limiting, even flawed. Not everyone wants to think of their Creator as a personified male; not all fathers have been good to their children. So how do we recapture the original intention of this opening? Crossan addresses this issue by saying that the word “father” should be understood less in terms of its gendered sense and more in terms of its content, especially as Jesus and his Jewish contemporaries would have understood it. God as Father is not so about much God’s biology, he maintains, but is a metaphor upholding the reputation of God as the head of the household, the one who is both provider and protector.

Crossan goes on to explain that in the Biblical world, three major groups are especially in need of God as provider and protector: the poor and needy – in a rich society, widows and orphans – in a patriarchal society, and resident aliens – in a tribal society. Inequality in any of these situations undermines the integrity of the household and dishonors the Householder. So we pray to God who is the head of the household of our world – a world that has enough for all our needs, but never enough for our greed.

For Crossan, to address our prayer to God as Father, as the householder of our world, aligns us with the long Biblical and prophetic tradition that proclaims the radical vision of God’s justice. This, he quickly goes on to say, does not mean retributive justice-- that is, dishing out punishment for the harm that was done-- but is rather more about distributive justice, distributing everything fairly. A God of “justice and righteousness” is a God who does what is just by doing what is right and does what is right by doing what is just. This God who cares about the poor, the widows, the orphans and the resident aliens.

The image of the Bible’s understanding of distributive justice comes from the experience of a well-run home, household, or family farm. We would be able to evaluate the household simply by entering into one. Is the field well tended? Do the animals look healthy? Are the buildings adequately maintained? Are the children and dependents well fed, clothed, and sheltered? Are the sick given special care? Does a pregnant and nursing mother get special concern? Does everyone have a fair share of everything? Or do some have far too much while others have too little?

Put simply, does everyone have enough?

And what about the household of God that is our church community?

Or that is our world?

What does “Abba, Father” imply--or dictate--with regard to health care reform?

To the redistribution of wealth in our society?

To immigration law?

If Crossan is right that this is what it means to pray to God as “Abba, the Father,” and if this prayer is intended to be normative and collective for the followers of Jesus,

then what are we doing to protect the honor of God’s name

and maintain integrity of the household--

in which we have a stake as God’s children, heirs with Christ?

What must we do to make God’s kingdom of distributive justice

become a reality for all creation?

Finally, because I know that there are those to whom the naming of God as “father” will always be a stumbling block, no matter how openly construed,

let us work for the day when our Church will understand

this prayer of Jesus, this greatest prayer,

not as the static object of rote memorization and recitation,

but as the spirit-filled well-spring of personal and global transformation.

Let us pray.

Eternal Spirit,

Source of all that is and ever shall be,

Loving Parent in whom we discern heaven,

May knowledge of your holiness inspire all peoples,

And may your commonwealth of peace and freedom flourish on earth

Until all of humankind heed your call to justice and compassion.

May we find the bread that we need for today,

And for the hurts we cause one another

May we be forgiven in the same measure that we forgive.

In times of trial and temptation, help us to be strong;

When life seems overwhelming, help us to endure;

And thus deliver from the yoke of sin.

May you reign in the power of human love,

Now and forever.

Amen.

Tom Hall’s adaptation of the New Zealand Prayer Book version:

<http://progressivechristianity.org/resources/lords-prayer/>