

# LESSONS IN LIVING

## *The Disciples' Prayer: Part I*

A St. Andrew's Sermon  
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby  
February 7, 2010

Scripture Reading: Matthew 6:7-13 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

We are beginning today a series on prayer that will last for two months, and we're going to walk through the Disciples' Prayer that you just heard and see how it illumines our lives. Today's part is a little ironic. It's the *Our Father* part, which is ironic for me because my father died earlier in the week, which gives it a kind of texture that it might not normally have.

But to me, I've always felt religion should be about life anyway, not some special subject outside of life. Very often, we've been given such a broken religion in this culture that we kind of expect it to break down at the times we need it the most, but we're too afraid to let it go, so we kind of crater whenever anything important happens and then come back to it again when we're strong. It shouldn't be like that. We shouldn't have to carry our religion, it should carry us.

I've always felt that the worse thing a minister can be is the exception to what's being taught. As I stood there by my Dad, with him dying, I thought of you. I've stood by so many of you over the years that had someone you love die. I was aware that this was not the first time this had ever happened, that this happens to everybody. If you live long enough, it happens to everybody. The alternative is for them to outlive you. It's the human condition. What I realized is that I had learned three very important lessons over the years. The first is that whenever there's a time of great pain, you go *deeper* into life. And the second is that when there's somebody that you're losing, you go *closer*. And finally, that you open yourself as fully as you can to life, even when it feels like you want to pull back. We're going to talk about those three lessons because I think they're all embedded in that image of God as a parent.

In Judaism, you don't often find the symbol of God as a parent; where you find it is in some of the pagan religions. And it was a symbol both male and female of that source out of which we all come. If anything, it's closer to a womb than anything masculine. But because it had to produce everything, it was both male and female. It was a parent. The word, *pater*, can be translated as "father" but it was heard as "parent". When we're in pain, we want our symbols of the depth to come up to the surface level. We want a god who is like a parent. Right there, in our midst. And as painful as it may be to realize, that is not what this symbol is leading us to. We will get back to that kind of comfort in a moment, but this is the symbol of that mysterious womb out of which we come and to which we return. It's not at the surface level, like a friend. It's more like the vine that produces the grape. And because we're grapes, we want it to be a grape. We want it to taste like grape juice; we want it to be round. It doesn't fit in our experience. It's completely other than us and yet it is the source out of which we come.

Now for many people that feels impersonal. It didn't feel impersonal the other day to me. To know there was something deeper that my father had come out of and was returning to - because none of my contexts were going to work. Now with someone in their eighties it's a whole lot easier to rationalize and you can get away with it. When a child dies, you do damage and violence to your own brain when you make excuses for that; when you find reasons why that makes sense. The vine is not like the grape, it is the source out of which the grape comes. In Aramaic, which may have been the language this prayer was originally spoken in, this word means *birther*, or *that which gives breath* - which is kind of beautiful. When I was a kid, I learned the doxology:

*Praise God from whom all blessings flow*

and I learned it with a very superficial understanding. But it felt a lot deeper and that there was something my father came from.

*Praise God from whom all blessings flow,  
Praise God above the heavenly hosts.*

In other words, don't try to raise angels or other beings to try to get comfort from that. Now you may need to do that to get through that day, but ultimately you'll wind up in the same place again, wondering why it happened. You need contact with something that is more basic than you are. You need to understand that it's a mystery that doesn't fit in your story, and that your story grows out of that mystery. And that if you stay in touch with it, even if your loss doesn't make sense, there's healing there. So the first lesson I've learned from you over the years, in times of sadness, go deep. Go deep below the storm of life, there's peace.

The second is to draw closer, and that can be very hard to do. When you feel like you're losing someone you've loved, there's a part of your heart that wants to close early and start grieving. And sometimes the death is slow enough for that to just happen. Sometimes, like my dad, so much of him had slipped away, mentally, that some of the family couldn't help but do some of the grieving prematurely. But to stay close, *stay close*.

My dad was an artist and the house was filled with his paintings. They meant so much to me. My dad almost worshipped from Norman Rockwell. He was in love with Norman Rockwell. When he was a young artist, he wrote Norman Rockwell a letter asking him what school to go to, and Norman Rockwell wrote back. He had that letter and he had another even more valuable letter where when Norman Rockwell's studio burned down. My dad sent him a consolation letter and Norman Rockwell sent back something that was astounding. It was sketches he had done of his studio burning! Think of that. Your life work is burning and you move closer into your heart. To me, that's a kind of wisdom that's very profound. And I felt that calling at that moment, *move closer*. Listen more attentively. The doxology says,

*Praise God all creatures here below*

and at times that feels really kind of mean, like the angels are up here, God's up here. What it's saying is, realize that we don't have to get outside of our species to find the love that we're looking for. In fact, every face we see is a gift from that source, from that parent. Then when we make God an invisible friend, it may comfort us for a while but the comfort that we're looking for is in each other - in the children of God. So you praise God as parent, you praise God as the children, us, all of us, including the animals. Every face that you look at - and some animals don't have very good faces - but they're all radiating an intelligence and you feel that.

My dad saw angels at the last. Now you know I don't believe there's such a species in the universe. When you look at centaurs from other religions, you don't have any problem realizing that those are symbols. Angels are so much a part of our culture that we don't realize they're bird people; that they're half human, half bird. Big wings on the back....feathers....see, it doesn't feel superstitious when it's yours. But I believe that my dad had an experience that's absolutely real. I don't believe in the special species of beings. . . I don't know how they fly very high, the wings, the atmosphere gets thin, kind of hard to fly up there with that . . .but I think he felt that connectedness through those images, through those religious images. And that's the point of them - to put into our sensual experience those invisible truths that tie us to the foundation and to each other at times when we may feel alone. We are the children of God.

Somebody after the first service in the class said something beautiful - when they lost their two daughters, they felt such a need to give love to those daughters that at first was just agony. And what they realized was that there were people all around them who needed that love. And that that's how the connection was reestablished. All around us are people desperately alone, needing that love that we desperately need to share. But it takes courage to do that because we're always saying hello and goodbye at the same time. Down here below, it's always that bitter sweetness. It's hello and goodbye at the same time. If we can live with that, it's exquisite. But it's very hard, isn't it?

Finally, I've learned from you over the years to open myself as fully as I possibly can. The more that I feel like I'm life, nature, humankind, the less alone I feel. I felt all of the people that I've stood beside as they were dying, that day. My dad was one example, very precious to me, but as I've said before, every one of you will have that experience both as customer and as supplier. The circle of life. In the original languages the word spirit meant *breath* and I want to get back to that in this translation. The holy breath that weaves in and out of all of us. As I stood there watching my dad die, I felt all of you and I realized that on that same moment, a million people were dying and a million people being born. And that it wasn't *my* pain, it was *our* pain, it was the world wound, and part of what makes us human. A part of what allows us to see beauty and to care about one another. As my dad was dying, a parting gift was to realize that when we talk about eternal life, we're really not talking about eternal life; we're talking about the universal life. We're talking about the common life. Because if we talk about eternal life, we talk about our little separate life and we stretch it out as long as we can. This was more exquisite than that. This was more intimate than that. The stepping outside of time and realizing that at our depth, we're one, no matter what is happening.

We're going to be talking about this prayer in the next few months, and each of the phrases will be an aspect of prayer, not as something religious, but as deep living, as deep listening, to what is happening to us. It's such a strange experience to see the eyes that watched you play softball get cloudy and become sightless; to feel the hands that helped you get dressed grow cold and lifeless. But I had learned to *go deeper. Move closer. Open completely to life.* And I was surprised to hear myself singing inside a hymn that as a child I'd been taught - that was so superstitious it was silly - but I was singing it mystically, and I found it so helpful.

*Praise God from whom all blessings flow,  
Praise God all creatures here below,  
Praise God above ye heavenly host,  
Praise parent, child, and holy breath.*

*Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.*

**The Disciples' Prayer Series**

*Part I:* February 7, 2010, Matthew 6:7-13 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

*Part II:* February 14, 2010, John 14:1-4; 8-19 (*The New Oxford Bible*);

World Scripture: Chandogya Upanishad

*Part III: Hallowed Be Thy Name.* February 21, 2010, John 8:30-59; Exodus 3:13-17 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

*Part IV: Thy Kingdom Come.* February 28, 2010, Matthew 6:25-31 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

*Part V: Our Daily Bread.* March 7, 2010, Exodus 16:13-21 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

*Part VI: Forgive Us Our Debts.* March 14, 2010, Matthew 18:21-35 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

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By calling ourselves progressive, we mean that we are Christians who...

- Have found an approach to God through the life and teachings of Jesus,
- Recognize the faithfulness of other people who have other names for the way to God's realm, and acknowledge that their ways are true for them, as our ways are true for us,
- Understand the sharing of bread and wine in Jesus' name to be a representation of an ancient vision of God's feast for all peoples,
- Invite all people to participate in our community and worship life without insisting that they become like us in order to be acceptable, including, but not limited to:
  - believers and agnostics,
  - conventional Christians and questioning skeptics
  - women and men,
  - those of all sexual orientations and gender identities,
  - those of all races and cultures,
  - those of all classes and abilities,
  - those who hope for a better world and those who have lost hope;
- Know that the way we behave toward one another and toward other people is the fullest expression of what we believe,
- Find more grace in the search for understanding than we do in dogmatic certainty – more value in questioning than in absolutes,
- Form ourselves into communities dedicated to equipping one another for the work we feel called to do:
  - striving for peace and justice among all people,
  - protecting and restoring the integrity of all God's creation, and
  - bringing hope to those Jesus called the least of his sisters and brothers,
- Recognize that being followers of Jesus is costly, and entails love, conscientious resistance to evil, and renunciation of privilege.

*(Developed by the Center for Progressive Christianity)*



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