

THE MELTING OF THE HEART

Matthew 6:7-15

“Pray, then, in this way: ‘Our Father...’”

A sermon preached by the Rev. David Handley
at the First Presbyterian Church of Clarksville, TN

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Jesus was once asked, “Rabbi, what is the greatest of all the commandments?” The religious world of Jesus’ day was very devout, and very complicated. There were some 630 commandments one had to obey in order to be right with God. So it was no casual question that was given Jesus. The Lord responded, *“that we love the Lord our God with all of our heart, and all of our soul, and all of our mind; and the second greatest is like the first: that we love our neighbor as ourselves. On these two hang all the Law and the Prophets.”*

Presbyterians are pretty good about “loving the Lord our God with our *minds*.” We love the scholarly part of our faith; we will talk any religious issue to death; if there is something that needs to be done, we will...well, form a committee, study it, and talk about it until we have forgotten what it was we were supposed to do in the first place. Thus Presbyterians have sometimes been called not “God’s chosen people,” but “God’s frozen people.” In the history of our country, while the Baptists and Methodists were pushing westward, winning the pioneer lands for Christ, Presbyterians were sending their clergy back to school to make sure they got the message right before they dared share it. Yes, we do love the Lord with our *minds*.

The story is told about a worship service in one of our large cathedral churches in the middle of a big city, where everything was very buttoned-down and formal—great music, thoughtful preaching, the ushers all walked down the long center aisle in step. When it came time for the sermon, the preacher took off with his first stirring point; and there was a man in the middle of the congregation who shouted out, “Amen!” People looked around, surprised; but the preacher went on. A few minutes later, some example the preacher told stirred this man again, he raised his hands with enthusiasm and shouted out, “Hallelujah!” The people in the pews stirred uneasily. The preacher went on; but the head usher was not about to leave anything to the imagination. He tip-toed up to the pew where the man was sitting, and said, “Sir, you can’t do that here!” The man seemed awakened from his rapture, looked over apologetically at the usher: “Oh, I’m sorry, sir; you see, I’ve just been saved!”...The usher looked at him, unmoved, and in a huff said, “Well, I’m quite sure that didn’t happen here!”

Well, let's hope that does happen here; because Jesus said that the greatest of all commandments is that we love God with all of our...*hearts!*, with "the melting of the heart." And let me suggest that "melting of the heart" begins with Prayer. So Jesus tells us, "When you pray, begin with *Our Father...*"

Now, this is an amazing beginning. Especially in the context of a people who knew something about the *holiness* of God, the *awe* of God, the *majesty* of God, to say to His disciples that they could begin their prayers by addressing God as "*our Father*" was quite remarkable! We have been so acculturated to beginning our prayers this way, but can we pause long enough to appreciate the uniqueness of this one gift alone that Jesus gives us..to address God as "our Father"? The spiritual DNA of the Jews goes back to Sinai, where Moses led the people out of bondage in Egypt; they were brought there by "the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night" to receive the Law. Only Moses could ascend the holy mountain; the mountain quaked with the awesomeness of a holy God, so much so that the people cried out to Moses, "You speak to the Lord; but we must not get close lest we die!"

And Jesus said, when you follow me, I will clear the way, I will show you a new way into the Father's heart, and you will begin your prayers in the intimacy of that relationship, "*Our Father...*"! The word for "Father" that Jesus was suggesting was what they had heard Him use every time He prayed. In the common peoples' Hebrew, called Aramaic, it is "Abba." *Abba* captures the first word that comes from a Hebrew baby's lips when it reaches out to its father. *Abba, abba, abba...daddy*. For the mother, it was *immi, immi*. This first discovery about prayer is the key to the whole of the Gospel. It is the key to understanding Communion; it is the key to understanding the crucial necessity of Jesus in the whole equation of our faith. Because the cross of Christ clears the way; Jesus sweeps the path clean--from our sins, our fears, from the pride of our self-sufficiency, and from our need to control our own lives...and He leads us into the Father's heart by the pathway of Grace.

In the Wednesday morning Bible Study last week, we read through our Gospel Lesson for today twice, as we always do, and I asked those around the table to listen on that second reading to which verse connected with them in a special way, and why. Three of those present were drawn to Jesus' words, as He was encouraging His disciples not to "heap up empty phrases, thinking they will be heard by their many words..." And it was the following phrase that was the connecting point for them, "*You don't have to be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask.*"

Then why pray?, one of the group asked. "I think it is for the relationship," another observed. The relationship. I shared with the group an experience that seems to be a recurrent one, on a week when I was all keyed up with anxiety and feeling a bit overwhelmed, just out of sorts. I was rather mystified, because it seemed that everything was going well. Was it lack of sleep, or something I ate; what was it? And then I realized I had not taken any time that week to

sit down and have a quiet time, to open my Bible, read a half chapter of the Gospels, and write down some thoughts and turn them into a written prayer. Finally I got a morning when I just made myself sit down and take a few minutes to open a prayer book my brother gave me, and the prayer began, “Our Father...” Immediately, I felt something in me relax. I felt something like a homesickness; and I realized how much I missed that connection, so busy about the *doing* of the faith, but not going back to the Source to “plug in,” as it were. And just for a moment, there was a “melting of the heart.”

One of the most famous stories in this regard is the story of John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church. Wesley grew up in the Anglican church in the 1700’s. At Oxford, he was significantly influenced by a movement on campus called The Oxford Group, which helped students think more seriously about developing their faith and service to Christ. Out of that experience, Wesley felt the call to enter the priesthood in the Anglican church, and was ultimately sent to America as a missionary, down in Savannah, Georgia. Well, his first mission experience turned out to be a bust; his intensity and judgmentalism gave a harshness to his ministry, and he was sent back home to do some further preparation.

On the way home, the ship encountered a fierce storm, so fierce in fact they were prepared to die, with winds tearing the sails and huge waves spilling over onto the deck. Young Wesley was in absolute terror. But in the midst of it all, he looked over to another corner of the deck to see some Moravian Christians in a circle of prayer. There was a calm about them that got his attention. What was it about their faith that gave them such confidence in the midst of the terror of death?

The ship, crew, and passengers on board ultimately weathered the storm and arrived safely back in London. But Wesley never forgot that experience, and the Moravian Christians that seemed to have a heart-faith he did not experience. One evening, following evening prayers at St. Paul’s Cathedral, Wesley walked down Aldersgate Street and attended a Bible Study group sponsored by the Moravians. Here is his account of the “melting of the heart” that ended up transforming England and America in subsequent generations:

“That evening, I reluctantly attended a meeting on Aldersgate Street. About 8:45 in the evening, someone read from Luther’s Preface to the Epistle to the Romans.

While he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.”

In these next several weeks, as we look at the various lines of the Lord's Prayer, I hope you will bring with you a spirit of expectation, that there is a whole large room to explore, where Christ is waiting for you, the fire is lit, and we will grow together in "loving God with all our our heart, soul, mind and strength." Alleluia! Amen.