

## **Our Father...Howard be thy Name**

January 30, 2011

### **Scripture: Deuteronomy 4:32-40**

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For ask now about former ages, long before your own, ever since the day that God created human beings on the earth; ask from one end of heaven to the other: has anything so great as this ever happened or has its like ever been heard of? Has any people ever heard the voice of a god speaking out of a fire, as you have heard, and lived? Or has any god ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and by terrifying displays of power, as the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes? To you it was shown so that you would acknowledge that the LORD is God; there is no other besides him. From heaven he made you hear his voice to discipline you. On earth he showed you his great fire, while you heard his words coming out of the fire. And because he loved your ancestors, he chose their descendants after them. He brought you out of Egypt with his own presence, by his great power, driving out before you nations greater and mightier than yourselves, to bring you in, giving you their land for a possession, as it is still today. So acknowledge today and take to heart that the LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other. Keep his statutes and his commandments, which I am commanding you today for your own well-being and that of your descendants after you, so that you may long remain in the land that the LORD your God is giving you for all time.

### **1 Peter 2:4-10**

Come to him (Jesus), a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in scripture:

'See, I am laying in Zion a stone,  
a cornerstone chosen and precious;  
and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.'

To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe,

'The stone that the builders rejected  
has become the very head of the corner',  
and

'A stone that makes them stumble,  
and a rock that makes them fall.'

They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Once you were not a people,  
but now you are God's people;  
once you had not received mercy,  
but now you have received mercy.

## Proclamation of the Gospel

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The journalist asked, "Do you believe in God, Mr. Fulghum?"

"No," he replied, "but I do believe in Howard."

Robert Fulghum goes on to explain how he comes up with "Howard."

In Sunday School he learned the Lord's Prayer and as children do, he would mumble the prayer.

It sounded like the teacher said, "Our Father who art in heaven, Howard be thy name."

Howard was a name he knew. His mother's maiden name was Howard. In his house they would say the Howards are getting together or Howards are people who are punctual. His grandmother, the matriarch was even referred to as Mother Howard. So when he prayed to God whose name is Howard, Fulghum just felt like he was already a part of an important family, a clan of Howards. And when his grandfather died and went to heaven, Fulghum thought about what a big shot his grandfather was because God and his grandfather sort of got mixed up in his mind. So he claims that he had a pretty comfy notion of God and his importance to God. When he prayed his prayers at night, he felt very connected to the Universe, because it was the Howard family enterprise. (Robert Fulghum, *Uh-Oh*, pp. 134-135)

Our image of God is always wrapped in our experience. We use words to talk about God, to describe God, but words are always metaphor, analogy, simile, but language has limits. When we say God is my rock. We do not mean that rocks and God are the same thing. When Jesus describes God like a mother hen protecting her chicks. It is an image...a great image that helps us see something about the character of God, the fiercely tender God. And sometimes, like in Fulghum's case, the words and the image can be confused.

The Bible gives witness to all sort of aspects of God's nature: wind, fire, strong fortress, still small voice...all metaphors of God's revelation. In the passage of Deuteronomy today, the historian tells how God was revealed to the Hebrew children and to Moses, in particular. When God reveals God's self to Moses, for the first time, God tells Moses his name, YHWH- a verb- I AM. When you go tell Pharaoh, tell him I AM sent you. God is action. God's name is being and life itself. I AM sent me, Moses told Pharaoh.

But today's portion of the Lord's prayer reminds us of another way of speaking about God. God is "our Father"...and you can call God Howard if you wish. When Christians call God Father, we are saying two very important things.

First, we acknowledge the Son, Jesus the Christ, the Messiah. Thanks to Jesus, we have been given the fullest glimpse of the nature of God, the father. If anyone knows me, Jesus says, they know my father. When we pray our Father, we acknowledge Jesus, the Son and the work of the Holy Spirit who prays in and through us. We believe that God is indeed a community- a Trinity- three in one- mystery and unity. God is a relationship. Have you ever thought about the Trinity that way? God is like a family.

When an Episcopal priest invites the congregation to pray the Lord's Prayer together, she or he usually leads in this way, "Now as our Savior Christ, has taught us, we are bold to pray..." Have you ever thought about the boldness of this prayer? We address God Almighty directly, no need for an intercessor. What we pray is radical. We are praying to the God of the Universe and claiming our connection through his son. So when we pray Our Father we are praying as the Son teaches us. And we are part of the family of God. So first of all when we pray Father, we are claiming our inheritance in God's family.

But what may be the BOLDEST most radical part about it is the word, OUR. Have you ever thought about it? We do not say “my father who art in heaven.” In that one little possessive pronoun, our, we are claiming not only our kinship to God, but to all God’s creation. When we pray this prayer on Sunday mornings, we are claiming our kinship to all whom God creates and calls. In fact, at Sermon Starters this week, we all realized that we never pray the Lord’s Prayer alone in our private prayers, but always in corporate worship. We are praying the family prayer of the people of God. We can pray it alone, but when we pray, “Our Father” we summon all the saints throughout time who have come before us and those who are living now. Secondly, the most important part of the prayer is the word OUR.

In Baptism when we claim the name child of God, we are given this prayer as a gift. It is the family prayer. I know we have prayers that are part of our tradition. {Growing up, my father always prayed before the meal. To this day, I have no idea what he said. My brothers and I laugh about this. The Smith family prayer was definitely prayed for God’s ears only...I do think it ended with “bless these gifts ....and us to thy service.” Chuck grew up in the Moravia church in Winston Salem, the Conrad family blessing goes... “Come Lord Jesus, our guests to be and bless these gifts bestowed by thee.”

To our son Avery’s ears it went like this, “Come Lord Jesus our guest to be and bless these gifts bestowed by bobby.” So Avery thought God’s name was Bobby.}

Jesus gave us a family prayer. It begins with OUR. Not that we possess God, but are to be possessed by God. We belong to God and so do Christians throughout the globe. God created us and claims us. And God promises to make us God’s people. According to 1 Peter, we “are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people,” We are not God’s because of who we are or what we have done, we have the pure joy of being God’s own because of what God in Jesus Christ has done.

All of us are here because God has lots and lots of friends who have shared the faith with us. Someone had to walk the walk and talk the talk. Some of Jesus friends, our brothers and sisters in Christ, had to tell us the story. Someone had to live the life that makes us say, I want to know more about this God in Jesus. The call to follow always comes to a group, a people. None of us can follow Jesus alone. And we have been given a wonderfully, rich, and interesting family to help us. We get by with help from God’s friends. And these are friends of God’s choosing not our own....which pushes us beyond a comfy, cozy relationship with God the father, to the sometimes challenging call to be related to all our brothers and sisters! There is nothing simple about that.

I visited St. Gregory’s Episcopal Church in the Mission District of San Francisco last year. The room you enter is circular and smack dab in the center is the communion table. Inside the dome of the rotunda is a fantastic mural of a circle of saints. The wild thing is that they are all dancing!!! They are on the move, in step with each other, moving with the Spirit of God through time. Even more unique are all those depicted: the saints one would expect to see like St. Francis of Assisi and a few animals, and others one would not expect like Miriam, Moses sister, Sojourner Truth, King David, and John Coltrane . They even include a Scottish Presbyterian Social Worker, Donaldina Cameron, a local saint. Defying Chinese gangs and corrupt police, she started a safe house in Chinatown for kidnapped Chinese girls who were being traded for slaves and prostitutes. All the saints follow the lead of Jesus dancing around the rotunda of the worship space all centered on the church’s communion table.

[http://www.saintgregorys.org/Resources\\_pdfs/Dancing\\_Saints\\_Bios2.pdf](http://www.saintgregorys.org/Resources_pdfs/Dancing_Saints_Bios2.pdf)

People have danced the dance of faith and showed us how to dance! The gift of faith to us, according to 1 Peter is “in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” We are made a people, claimed as members of God’s household so that we might praise! Dance we must!

For...

*Once you were not a people,  
but now you are God’s people;  
once you had not received mercy,  
but now you have received mercy. 1 Peter 2:10*

At St. Gregory’s what is even more amazing than the art of the dancing saints, is their mission. Their worship is tied to their life. Every Friday, in that same rotunda, the communion table and sanctuary becomes a food pantry. The worship space is also their food pantry...this is my body, this is my blood. They realize they are a people who have received mercy and have learned from the Father’s Son to pass that mercy on. They recognize that their stressed out, poor neighbors are kinfolk, part of God’s family, too.

It reminds me of December when our church packed 400 boxes of groceries to take to our neighbors in need. Fort Hill takes good news into the neighborhood.

I, for one, am grateful to be a member of God’s family and thankful to join in the dance celebrating the good news together with you and all the saints! May we live what we profess with our lips when we pray, “Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name,” inviting all God’s children into the dance of praise.

I think Howard would be pleased.

Fort Hill Presbyterian Church  
Rev. Laura Smith Conrad