

**DECEMBER 4, 2011 HOMILY  
AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH**

**“OUR ABBA FATHER GOD”  
Galatians 3:23-4:5**

God is great! Very great! An Australian astronomer recently reported that through his work he had come up with an estimate of how many stars there are in the entire universe. He claims that there are approximately 70 sextillion stars in existence. That means the number 70 with 22 “0’s” behind it! That is a lot of stars, more stars than there are grains of sand on all the beaches and deserts of our planet Earth. (in “Our Daily Bread”, 3/13/05)

And God made all of those 70 sextillion stars. And He is far “bigger” than they are. Yes, God is great.

But that fact (of how great, omnipotent, omnipresent, all-knowing, etc., our God is) sometimes leads to misperceptions about Him. God’s greatness leads some to think of Him as very distant and remote. And some think of Him as a universal policeman, a cosmic cop looking down at us for a chance to punish us. They think of Him as watching over the world holding a bunch of lightning bolts to zap us with if we get out of line.

There’s a story about something that happened in a parochial school. It was lunch time and the children were going through the cafeteria line to get their meals. On the counter was a bowl of big red apples. And a sign had been put over the apples that read, “Only one apple each. And remember, God is watching!” Further down on the serving counter was a tray of very scrumptious looking chocolate chip cookies. And some wise-aleck boy had put his own sign over the cookies. His sign read, “Take all the cookies you want. And don’t worry about God—He’s busy guarding the apples.”

Well, that story’s idea of what God is like is wrong in lots of ways! God is certainly not some cosmic tough guy who is out to get us!

No, our God, as great as He is, is a Father, a loving Father. And He is a Father who has adopted Christians to be His own children. Our epistle reading today, from St. Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians, talks about this. Hear again what the holy apostle wrote in Galatians 4: 4-5-----“But when the time had fully come, God sent forth His Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, *so that we might receive adoption as sons.*” The Father sent His Only-Begotten Son, the Second Person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ, to the world to redeem us, to save us, to make us sons and daughters of God by adoption. The whole reason Christ came at Christmas was summed up by St. Paul in this epistle reading. To repeat part of Galatians 4, verse 5---“*so that we might receive adoption as sons.*”

As Christians we believe that God is not only the Almighty Creator but that He is also a loving father who loves us enough to adopt us to be His children. And because, in Christ, the Father has become *our* Father, we speak to Him as a child does to his father. I am going to read the verse that comes just after today’s assigned reading, so we can see what St. Paul says about this. Galatians 4:6---“And because you are His sons, God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba, Father!’”. The term St. Paul uses here, “abba”, has nothing to do with the Swedish singing group---my apologies to any parishioners who are Abba fans and, when seeing the sermon title, thought that perhaps I would sing you a few of their songs! Wrong!

No, “abba” is an Aramaic word, the intimate Aramaic word for “father”. It’s very similar to the

Arabic and Hebrew words for father, too, as all three languages are close to each other. But, in the New Testament, it is an Aramaic word that is usually not translated into English. It is the close and personal way to address one's father. Some think it could actually be translated as "Daddy" or "Papa". It is the title, really the term of endearment, that a child gives to its beloved father.

When we call out to our God, when we address Him as "Father", "Abba", "Daddy", it is because we are not just His creatures. We are also His children. St. Paul talks about this in another of his letters, too, in Romans 8:14-16----"For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of sonship. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!', it is the Spirit Himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God."

St. John Chrysostom, in his homily on this passage from Romans, says that in the Old Testament God was never addressed in prayer as "Father". The word is used of Him in a descriptive way, but not as a term of address. The people of the Old Covenant knew God was their Father but it was seen as just too intimate, too bold, to actually call Him Father "to His face".

But ever since Jesus Christ came and made us the adopted children of God the Father, we *do* call Him Father, Abba, in our prayers. You know what our most common prayer is, the one Christ Himself told us to pray. And you know how it starts---"Our Father". And in the liturgy, in just a few minutes, before we pray the Lord's Prayer, the priest, on behalf of all the people, will pray the following words----"Vouchsafe, O Lord, that with boldness and without condemnation we may *dare* to call upon Thee, the heavenly God, as Father...." We dare to address God as Father, as Abba, because He has adopted us, He has made us His children in Christ.

So...when you pray, pray to Him from the heart. Let your prayer go from your heart to the heart of your loving Father God, your Abba. Don't just rattle off a lot of words without thinking about them, whether they be the words of the written prayers or your own words. Pray from your heart to your Abba's heart.

Father Porphyrios was a wonderfully holy man and monk in 20<sup>th</sup> century Greece. A man of prayer, he prayed pretty much all the time! He prayed all day long, in close communion with the Lord. And he even often prayed when he was asleep. Father Porphyrios had many visitors looking for advice and guidance, sometimes guidance in how to pray. He got himself a pet parrot which he kept in his little cell where he lived. He trained the parrot to talk; not to say "Polly wants a cracker", but "Lord, have mercy." So fairly often, the cell would be filled with the parrot's brash voice yelling out happily, "Lord, have mercy." Sometimes this would happen right while the monk was giving someone advice on how to pray. He would be teaching a pilgrim about how to pray and the bird would scream, "Lord, have mercy." And Father Porphyrios would take the opportunity to point out a good lesson---the parrot was very good at saying the words of a prayer, but certainly wasn't really praying. I think the person seeking advice would remember that lesson! (in The Gurus, The Young Man, and Elder Paisios, Dionysios Farasioitis, St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 2009, p. 285.)

When you pray, you're not talking to some idea, or some abstract force, or to some distant God. You are talking to your Abba. So don't be like the parrot. Pray from your heart to your dear, beloved Father God. Put your heart into your prayers. Mean what you pray.

Personal, intimate, heart-felt prayer with your Abba Father God is a good way to prepare for death (even if that's still far in your future, but, of course, who knows how long it will be?). In his

book, The Hidden Man of the Heart (Mount Tabor Publishing, 2008), Archimandrite Zacharias of England discusses this. He says that if you spend time in heart-felt prayer with your Father, you will be more ready for death. You will start to see that death for a Christian is a matter of changing from talking with your Father from this world or speaking with Him in a much closer way in the life to come. The close relationship you have with Him here will just get closer there.

God, the Almighty Creator, is also your Father, your Abba, your “papa”. So speak to Him from your heart---cry “Abba! Father!” to Him as St. Paul spoke about in Romans 8. Get to know your Father well here, so that you can get to know Him much better in the life to come.

A closing note---Thinking of God the Father as *your* Father/Abba is easier if you have had a good and loving human father. Our childhood experience with our earthly abba can influence a lot how we as adults think of our heavenly Abba. Was your earthly father loving and kind, forgiving and caring? Then it won't be hard to realize that your heavenly Father is like that, just much more so!

But.....what if your earthly father wasn't really like that? What if he was not very loving, but more distant and cold? Or what if he actually cruel or even abusive? That does not change the reality of what your heavenly Father is like, but it may make it harder for you to relate to Him as Father, as Abba.

Then you may have to work harder, exercise more faith, so as to personally realize that your Father God is indeed a good Father, not distant, cold, or cruel. And you may need to talk this through with someone. If this is a struggle for you, feel free to let me know. I'd be glad to try to help and there are other people who can do so, too.....

But if that is a struggle you have to face, don't give up. Struggle to realize deep down in your soul and heart that the One to whom we so often pray with the words “Our Father” is truly your loving and good Father, your Abba.