

The Midshipman's Prayer
"Almighty Father"
Mark 4:35-41

One of my favorite authors is Herman Wouk, best known in Navy circles for his 1952 Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Caine Mutiny*, describing life and tension aboard the fictional World War II destroyer-minesweeper USS Caine. Wouk wrote many other books to include *The Winds of War* and *War and Remembrance* which collectively chronicle the events of World War II as seen through the eyes of Commander Victor "Pug" Henry, a middle-aged naval officer serving as the military attaché to Berlin as the war begins.

When Wouk was preparing to write *War and Remembrance*, he realized that he needed to know more about The Manhattan Project – the top secret program which developed the first atomic bomb. Fortunately for Wouk, many of the scientists who worked on the project were still alive and several of them were teaching at Caltech at the time, so he made a visit to see them. Among them was the theoretical physicist Richard Feynman. When he met Feynman, Wouk described the book he was writing and explained his need to know more about the Manhattan Project in order to complete his novel. Feynman, in response, described his work on the atomic bomb, giving Wouk invaluable insight into the complex processes that led to its creation. At the end of their meeting, Feynman walked Wouk out of the building and as they were parting he asked Wouk, "Do you know calculus?" Wouk confessed that he didn't. "You had better learn it," Feynman said. "It's the language God talks."

Doubtless, many of you know calculus but most of us don't. And if God only speaks calculus then most of us are in real trouble. Fortunately, God is Omni-lingual. He speaks every language. But his principal language is the language of prayer. It's through prayer, by prayer, in prayer, with prayer that we speak to God and God speaks to us.

This week we begin a series of sermons on the Midshipman's Prayer. This prayer is included each week in our service of worship. It is a prayer appropriate to this congregation where Midshipmen worship and pray. It is a prayer appropriate for all of us who pray alongside them. It is a prayer that can serve as a model prayer for all of us seeking personal reformation and spiritual renewal.

Today I want to focus our attention on the opening petition: "Almighty Father, whose way is in the sea, whose paths are in the great waters, whose command is over all and whose love never faileth; let me be aware of Thy presence and obedient to Thy will."

It's important to note that only God's children can pray this prayer with any sense of honesty or integrity. Why? Because we pray to our Almighty Father in heaven whenever we pray the Midshipman's Prayer. And we can only pray to our Father in heaven if we are truly his children on earth.

How, then, do we become children of God? Well, we are not God's children by natural birth. We become God's children through spiritual birth. In John 3:7, Jesus said, "You must be born again!" This new birth, this spiritual birth, is given to all who believe in Jesus. First John 5:1 says, "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ (the Messiah – God's Anointed Savior) is born of God." And John 1:12 promises that God gives to those who receive Jesus, who believe in his name, the right to become children of God.

Are you a child of God? If so, you can pray this prayer with honesty and sincerity. If not, then I urge you to believe in and receive Jesus as your Savior. If you do that then you'll become a child of God. And as a child of God you can pray to your Almighty Father in heaven.

Now notice those first two words of the Midshipman's Prayer: Almighty Father. I believe those words form the foundation upon which all of our prayers should rest. The word "Almighty" points to God's omnipotence. The word "Father" points to God's benevolence. The word "Almighty"

points to his power. The word "Father" points to his passion. Together, these two words remind us that we pray to a God of infinite power and inexhaustible love.

Yes, the words "Almighty Father" should form the foundation upon which all our prayer should rest. Just as the dome of this great chapel rises high above our heads by resting on a foundation sunk deep in the earth, so too our prayers rise best to the heights of heaven when they rest upon the foundational conviction that we offer them up to a God who is both omnipotent and benevolent, powerful and passionate – a God whose command is over all and whose love never fails.

Why should our prayers rest on convictions such as these? Because if we don't believe God is omnipotent and benevolent then we probably won't pray or we will pray weak prayers.

For if God is not omnipotent then why should we take our prayers to him at all? If his power is finite then why should we seek his aid? We might, I suppose, ask for the assistance of a finite god, but we can never do so with any measure of real confidence. For if God's power is limited then we can never be sure he will have power enough to help us in our hour of need. So you see, our prayers should rest on the firm conviction that God is truly omnipotent!

Likewise, our prayers should rest on the firm conviction that God is benevolent, too. You see, whenever we pray we must believe that we pray to a Father who loves us and wants the best for us. As the father of four children, three of whom I have taken off either to college or to the military, I must confess that I was moved on I-day as I spoke with numerous fathers whose red-rimmed eyes bore touching testimony to the tears they shed in parting with their sons and daughters. Their love was evident. They impressed me as fathers who would do everything in their power to provide the very best for their children.

And that's the kind of Father we have in heaven! Jesus said, "Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (Luke 11:11-13 NIV)

Yes, just as the Midshipman's Prayer begins with the words "Almighty Father," all of our prayers should begin with the conviction that we pray to a God of omnipotence and benevolence, power and passion, infinite strength and inexhaustible love. Such a God longs to help us and has the power to do so.

But even when our convictions fail us and our faith is feeble, our God is faithful and exercises his powerful benevolence on our behalf even in response to the weakest of prayers. We see illustration of this in the activity of his Son as depicted in our gospel reading. Mark chapter four tells the tale of Jesus teaching by the seaside on the shores of Galilee.

And the Bible says, "...when evening had come, (Jesus) said to them, 'Let us go across to the other side.' And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, 'Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?' He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" (Mark 4:35-41 NRSV)

Here we see the feeble faith of the floundering disciples caught in the midst of a terrible storm and crying out to Christ, as the old translations have it, saying, "Carest thou not that we perish." And yet, despite their feeble faith, despite their collapsing convictions, despite their debilitating

doubts, despite the weakness of their prayer, Christ answered with loving power, exercised his omnipotence, and commanded peace upon the winds and waves. Little wonder the disciples were left with great awe at the actions of Jesus, and we are left with great comfort knowing that God will exercise his loving power on our behalf even when our faith is small.

And so the Midshipman's Prayer teaches us that we pray to a God of omnipotence and benevolence; a God of power and passion; a God of infinite strength and inexhaustible love; a God whose way is in the sea, whose paths are in the great waters, whose command is over all and whose love never fails. There is courage and comfort in remembering that this is the kind of God to whom we pray. When the storms of life are raging and we're tossed upon a cruel sea, we can take heart and have hope knowing that our feeblest of cries will always reach the ear of our Almighty Father above.

Twenty-five years ago, my eldest son was born in Norton's hospital in Louisville, Kentucky. In the middle of the night we were informed that he had a respiratory infection. The doctors tried to comfort us by assuring us that it wasn't serious enough to require moving him across the street to receive more specialized care at Kosair Children's hospital. But not long after they returned and told us that he was being moved over to Kosair. For ten days he stayed in ICU as they pumped his body full of medicines to fight what had become a life threatening infection. I will never forget going into the neonatal intensive care unit and seeing my son, all 8 pounds and 14 ounces of him, surrounded on every side by the tiniest of premature babies. It was an odd sight and yet, he was every bit as sick as they were.

At some point early in the process, probably around the time they moved him to ICU, I found myself alone in a waiting room high up in the hospital. I was tired, bone tired and I leaned my face against the cool glass of the waiting room window overlooking the city of Louisville to rest a moment before returning to my son's side. And in those quiet moments the words of an old hymn slipped silent-like into my mind. It was a hymn I didn't know. To my knowledge I had never heard nor sung it before. Afterwards I found a hymnal and looked it up to confirm that it was, indeed, a real hymn and not a figment of my imagination. Perhaps you know it. Its lyrics are a prayer to him whose paths are in the great waters, whose command is over all and whose love never fails.

(Lord) When the storms of life are raging,
Stand by me (stand by me);
When the storms of life are raging,
Stand by me (stand by me);
When the world is tossing me
Like a ship upon the sea
Thou Who rulest wind and water,
Stand by me (stand by me).

Imagine how comforted I was when God whispered those words into my ears and then accompanied them with the gift of his presence. For as I stood there in that waiting room, I began to sense the presence of Someone standing with me in the storm. Has that ever happened to you? Has the One who rules wind and water ever stood by you in some stormy time? Then you know the courage and comfort that comes when you know that you have Almighty Father standing by your side.

And so the first petition of the Midshipman's Prayer hastens to its close. "Almighty Father, whose way is in the sea, whose paths are in the great waters, whose command is over all and whose love never faileth; let me be aware of Thy presence and obedient to Thy will."

Let me be aware of Thy presence and obedient to Thy will. Indeed! For when we truly believe that we serve an Almighty Father, a God of omnipotence and benevolence, a God of power and

passion, a God of infinite strength and inexhaustible love, then we can't help but long to be more aware of his presence and more obedient to his will. We long for this because, as King David says in Psalm 16:11, our loving Father shows us the path of life. In his presence there is fullness of joy. And at his right hand there are pleasures forevermore!

My friend, is the God of all creation, your Almighty Father? Do you know yourself to be a child of God? If so, then you know you are surrounded by his omnipotence and benevolence, his power and passion, his infinite strength and inexhaustible love. And knowing this, you know you can successfully sail through whatever seas your Almighty Father has ordained for your life.

Let us pray:

Almighty Father, increase our faith in your power and love so that we can sail with courage through the stormy sea of life and come at last to the safe haven of heaven's blissful shore. Amen.

Discussion Questions:

1. The Midshipman's Prayer is a model prayer that can inform your life of prayer. What other model/written prayers do you know and how have they helped you to pray?
2. Do you agree that only God's children can pray the Midshipman's Prayer with honesty and integrity? Why or why not?
3. Read John 1:6-13, 3:1-8, and 1 John 5:1-5. What do these passages teach about how we become children of God?
4. The Midshipman's Prayer begins with the words "Almighty Father." Together, these two words remind us that we pray to a God of infinite power and inexhaustible love. How have you experienced the power of God? How have you experienced God's love?
5. Why is it important to believe that you pray to an Almighty Father whenever you offer up your prayers? What happens to your prayer life if you doubt God's power or his love?
6. Read Mark 4:35-41. How does this passage demonstrate that God answers even the weakest of his people's prayers? When has God answered you despite your feeble faith or debilitating doubts?
7. The preacher quotes a hymn that encouraged him during a time of trouble. What hymns have encouraged you through difficult times and how is God portrayed in them?
8. The first petition of the Midshipman's Prayer ends with these words: Almighty Father...let me be aware of your presence and obedient to your will. How does belief in God's power and love inspire a desire for his presence and a willingness to obey? Has this been your experience?
9. In what other ways does the first petition of the Midshipman's Prayer speak to you and inform your spiritual life and/or life of prayer?

ⁱ *The Language God Talks*, by Herman Wouk, pp. 3-5.