

Preacher: Is Luke 11 chapter verse two, Jesus said unto them, "When you pray, say our Father." This is to be a sermon today on the fatherhood of God. There is a sense in which this is to be understood as a means of getting at an interpretation of what the church had in mind when it set aside this Sunday as Father's day. But there is a more significant sense in which we need periodically to declare the meaning of the Christian doctrine that is involved in calling God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and to declare this in our churches. And this is why I am preaching on this today. I have waited for Father's day as the occasion for doing it. Now, I said, this is to be a sermon on the fatherhood of God, and yet the announced topic of the sermon is the paternity of God. Unless someone should think that this has been done merely because this sermon is to be preached from a university pulpit, and that perhaps university sermons are supposed to appear more learned than non-university sermons, I hasten to say that there is a distinction between fatherhood and paternity. Furthermore, it is a distinction with a difference. The difference is important. And what Christians mean to say about God is more fully contained in the 20th century meaning of the word paternity than it is in the 20th century meaning of the word fatherhood. I believe that there is a danger that if we freely use the term father to describe God and do not remind ourselves and our neighbors of the paternity of God, it is quite possible that we may lose a significant side of the understanding of the first person of the Trinity that has given us in the Bible. Speaking in purely human terms, if I refer to my father, my hero understands that I have direct hand almost exclusive reference to the husband of my mother, to the man who bounced me on his knee, who was born less than a hundred years ago. In a very real sense, this man is almost my contemporary. In my own instance, 44 of my father's 75 years have coincided with my own existence. And my son, aged 12, already knows more about music and space than his father has learned in 44 years. We are in a sense contemporaries. Now in slight contrast to this concept, the idea of paternity according to Webster's on abridged, includes all of our thought about immediate fatherhood but goes beyond it to suggest the concept of ultimate source. The paternity of each one of us includes our father, our grandfather, and all of the ancestors who preceded him. What we are talking about here is the cumulative and combined inheritance which comes to us through our fathers but which no single individual earthly father ever can fully personify. Now, thinking of God, in the broader sense of paternity rather than in the more restricted sense of fatherhood, makes the idea of God, a great deal more palatable to many people. Some sons and daughters in fact would like to forget Father's day because their male parent represented to them everything that was ugly and repulsive and personified nothing that was noble and inspiring. How many individuals do you know who have said that they dearly wish their fathers could have had the grace and goodness of their grandfathers? One young man said to me in another city a few years ago that although he realized he should be able to rise above this, his own experience had caused him to hate the word father. For, to him, it represented uncouth selfishness, marital infidelity, perpetual drunkenness, and cruel treatment. He was stuttered Kennedy, who once said that when he tried to tell a small boy in the slums that God was his Father, the boy wanted to hear nothing more that he had to say. Well, now, unless we become confused rather than illuminated by a too literal application of this fatherly analogy, it might be well for us to say right here that what we're talking about in this sermon and what we're talking about in the doctrine of the fatherhood of God is not fatherhood itself but the nature of almighty God

This is what the doctrine is about. This is what we are considering this morning. And the nature of Almighty God cannot be fully represented in any or all of the forms of human speech which are at our command, much less in any one word such as paternity or any one symbol, such as father. We are talking about a being so infinite that He is beyond our ability to comprehend even if adequate words were available to describe Him, which they are not. The biblical faith represents Him as being all knowing, all wise, all powerful, all loving, and His existence and dominion are measured from everlasting to everlasting. Now, even though our human intellects have a way of craving analogies, when it comes to the nature of God, all our analogies are inadequate. God is like a father. Yes, but much more. God is like a king. Yes, but much more than a king. God is like a watchmaker. Yes, but that is not all. God is like a physician, like a pilot, like a law giver, like a teacher, like a friend, like a guardian. He is judge, creator, redeemer, shepherd, counselor. And yet when we have added up all these things, God is much more than the sum of all of them. When my sister was five years of age, I saw her eating a peach one day and I asked her what it tasted like. She said it tasted like a peach. In the final analysis, we arrive at that same irreducible point in attempting to describe God. What is God like? He is like God. In the third chapter of Exodus, which was read a while ago by Dr. Henry, we are told how the word of God came to Moses when he was tending Jethro's sheep on Mount Horeb. God sent Moses on an historic errand to go into Egypt and take to the Israelite captives the excellent news that they soon were to be delivered from bondage. Well, now Moses was staggered by this announcement. First, he asked God who he was to be going on such an errand. And next he asked who God was to be sending him on such an errand. And God's reply to the second question strikes at the very heart of what we're talking about this morning. He said to Moses, "I am who I am." What do peaches taste like? Peaches. Who is God? He is God. "I am who I am." There is an overwhelming sense, beloved, in which the being and the nature of God are past our finding out. But it is very healthy for us from time to time to stand like Moses beside the burning bush, with our shoes removed from our feet in humble reverence, and with bewildered intellects. Here, Almighty God declares to us, I am who I am. Because in a day when popular songwriters flippantly refer to the deity as the man upstairs and when we are told that my God and I walk through the fields together hand in hand, it is important that we should solemnly and awfully be quiet before the mystery and the majesty of Almighty God. And learn, again, what some of the old Hebrews learned about Him when they declined even to speak His name because His name was too Holy to pronounce. Instead they said Adonai, which means the name. They would refer to the name of God but would not speak the name. And yet having said that, there is another word which must soon be spoken. Healthy as it is, necessary as it is, to stand by the burning bush and look into the mystery of an infinite deity, we simply cannot indefinitely endure the strong light which pierces our eyes when we do this. Mark Bergner once said that God is like the sun. In that, by His light, all things on earth are intelligible. But if we attempt to look directly into the center of His nature, we are almost blinded by the strong light. And having looked, we cannot exactly report the detailed outline of what we have seen. Jesus knew that we need to deal with God in less austere terms most of the time. And even the theologian who in the classroom can talk about the ground of all being and the God beyond God, finds when he walks into the chapel that these categories are not sufficient. The brilliant theologian who can write volumes explaining that the nature of God involves the eternal duality of being and becoming, finds when he prays that the personal relationship between himself and the Supreme Being has to be cast in a different mold. And so Jesus Christ said, "When you pray, say our Father." I think He did not necessarily mean to say, when you discuss the theories of your faith, say our Father but He did say, "When you pray, say our Father." Now, this is because when we move from discussing our theological theories about God, to

engaging in worship and in wakeness, we immediately move from the role of spectator to the role of participant, from observation to relationship. And what is the relationship of the created to the creator? That of sheep to a shepherd? Perhaps. That of subjects to a king? In a sense. But the analogy which our Lord thought most fitting was the relationship of children to their father. Of course, there are two things that have to be noticed about this right away when we say this. The first is that when Jesus used this analogy, He was thinking of fatherhood at its best not at its crummy worst. Second, He was thinking of fatherhood as it was understood in His place and time. Fatherhood in that ancient day of Palestine meant much more of what we today mean by paternity, than by what we in this day of individualism mean by fatherhood. Then and there, the father was closely linked with his ancestors in the minds of his children. The endless genealogies, the frequent references to the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob made this very clear. The father was identified with the grandfather and the great-grandfather. He personified the paternal inheritance. And so when Jesus spoke of God as Father, He meant it in the sense of paternity of the ultimate source not merely the immediate occasion of life. Now, this being the case, friends, there are certain clear and inescapable conclusions which we have to draw from this. If we're going to think in these terms about God then there are certain other things which we have to accept which follow inevitably. The first is that all of us are dependent upon the providence of God as children are dependent upon the providence of an earthly father. Our proper attitude is an attitude of trust. God is the source of our life. The ground of our being. He is our maker. Not only that, but our life from moment to moment now is dependent upon His continued care and grace. It is He that has made us and not we ourselves, proclaims the scriptures. And of course, while it's true that there is much that we can and should be doing to provide for ourselves from day to day, there's a much more fundamental sense in which our attitudes should be that of looking upward toward God in faith. Jesus said, "Behold the fowls of the air, "your heavenly Father feedeth them, "consider the lilies of the field how they grow. "Even Solomon in all of his glory "was not arrayed like one of these. "Therefore do not be anxious saying, what shall we eat? "What shall we wear? "What shall we drink? "Your heavenly Father knows that you need them all." Now, the thought here is that although we must labor for our welfare, God is the providence source of everything we have and are. Even as early as the writing of the Psalms in the old Testament, this was recognized. You remember that interesting verse in Psalm 104:21? "The young lions roar after their prey "and seek their meat from God." Now, the second conclusion that we must draw from Christ's teaching about God's relationship to us is that His attitude toward us is one of benevolence and of love, not of hostility and of rejection. He wants the very best for us. Jesus said, "What man is there of you "whom if his son asked bread, will he give him a stone? "If ye, then being evil "know how to give good gifts unto your children, "how much more shall your Father, which is in heaven "give good things to those who ask Him?" Now, sometimes this love can be painful to the children of God. A small boy slid down a plank, stuck a splinter six inches long into the muscle of his leg. His father gripped the end of it with a pair of pliers and pulled it out because they were many miles from a surgeon. The son was almost unable to bear that pain. The father knew what would happen if the splinter remained in the muscle. And although it hurt the father as badly as it hurt the son to pull it out, he loved his son too much to let it stay in. Though the son did not immediately appreciate it, he ultimately appreciated it. I know I was that son. We are told in the book of Hebrews, "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord "nor lose courage when you're punished of Him, "for the Lord disciplines him whom He loves and chastises every son whom He receives." You see God loves us too much to be indifferent to our welfare. He cares that we shall have the best gifts. Now, the third conclusion we must draw

from the Christian doctrine of the paternity of God is that He loves all of His children equally. And He insists that we love all His children equally. Just as the nature of the mature father makes him play no favorites among his children, so God does not. Christ said He maketh His son to rise on the evil and on the good. He sends rain on the just and on the unjust. This rain is not only falling upon people here at the Duke chapel, falling on people who are scheming foul schemes elsewhere. God treats us equally and He wants us to treat each other equally and with equal love. Jesus said, "When you pray, say not my Father, our Father." A great many years ago, the children of Israel thought that they were God's special pets, and that He loved them of above everyone else. So God sent the prophet Amos to them to encourage them to love the Gentiles as much as they loved each other. Amos stood up in their midst and said "Are ye not as the children of the Ethiopians?" "Unto me, all children of Israel sayeth the Lord. "Have not I brought up Israel out of the land of Egypt?" And you can hear the Israelites answering "Yes, of course. "You love us." But that wasn't the end of the speech that God gave Amos to say. "Have not I brought up Israel "out of the land of Egypt and Philistines "from Caphtor and the Syrians from Kir?" "Sure I brought you out of the land of Egypt "oh children of Israel because I love you. "But I also brought up the Philistines "and I brought up the Syrians because I love them too." God makes no distinctions in His love for His children. He insisted we not make any distinctions either. Now, the last conclusion that we shall draw this morning from the doctrine of the fatherhood of God is that the heavenly Father has set an example for all of us who are earthly fathers. And we should pattern our human parenthood after the ways of the divine parenthood. We should provide for our children as best we can. We should love them intelligently and we should love them equally. "Be ye therefore perfect even as your father "which is in heaven is perfect." So in closing, I want to point out what has already been headed at, namely that the paternity of God or the fatherhood of God understood in the sense of Christ is not primarily a doctrine of Christianity. It is primarily a relationship. It is involvement. And because of this relationship, we can know ourselves to be more important than we ever could be possibly important otherwise. We're members of the family of God. As many as are led by the spirit of God, they are the sons of God. For we have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear, but have received the spirit of adoption whereby we cry Abba Father. The spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit that we are the sons of God. Oh God, who has taught us to call the Father. Now in love and affection and in faithfulness, we commit our ways unto thee, We accept thy offer of sonship, and we join thy family through the grace of Jesus Christ, our Lord. And now may the grace of Christ, the love of God the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be among you and remain with you now and ever more. (gentle music)