

## CALL TO WORSHIP

Father, you wait for us – perhaps patiently, perhaps not – to set aside these minutes from the helter-skelter of our lives. You, who are everywhere, wait until we settle ourselves in the pews. We are here, Great God, we are finally here. We bring our hungry, aching hearts, our trials and our triumphs, our needs, our wants, our desires. We bring you our love, Father, our love and our lives. Do with us what you will. Amen.

## INVOCATION

### **The Secret Heart**

*by Robert Peter Tristram Coffin*

Across the years he could recall  
His father one way best of all.  
In the stillest hour of night  
The boy awakened to a light.  
Half in dreams, he saw his sire  
With his great hands full of fire.  
The man had struck a match to see  
If his son slept peacefully.  
He held his palms each side the spark  
His love had kindled in the dark.  
His two hands were curved apart  
In the semblance of a heart.  
He wore, it seemed to his small son,  
A bare heart on his hidden one,  
A heart that gave out such a glow  
No son awake could bear to know.  
It showed a look upon a face  
Too tender for the day to trace.  
One instant, it lit all about,  
And then the secret heart went out.  
But shone long enough for one  
To know that hands held up the sun.

SCRIPTURE

*“Set your troubled hearts at rest. Trust in God always; trust also in me. There are many dwelling-places in my Father’s house; if it were not so I should have told you; for I am going to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I shall come again and take you to myself, so that where I am you may be also; and you know the way I am taking.” Thomas said, “Lord, we do not know where you are going, so how can we know the way?” Jesus replied, “I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except by me.” (John 14:1-6, REB)*

OFFERTORY

Father, you have given us our gifts, our talents, our loves, our very lives. You have given us the hope and the joy that spring from knowing your love, and all you ask is that we share what you have given us. Please accept these gifts we give, that these blessings you have given us can be shared with all who want them.

## NO ONE COMES TO THE FATHER EXCEPT BY ME

I love my friends. I really do. I don't just like them; if you are my friend, I love you dearly. One of the things I REALLY love is when one of my friends opens up about their misgivings about the Christian faith. The last time I had the privilege of preaching, the sermon grew out of conversation where a friend sat at my dinner table expressing frustration over the entire concept of Hell. This time it's because years ago a friend boiled over with indignation about the sheer ARROGANCE of Jesus when he replied, "*I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except by me.*" Oh, my friend's fury and derision: "Really? REALLY? Who do these Christians think they are, telling everyone that they, and they ALONE, know the way to God? Oh, it makes my blood boil!" We might have been drinking at the time because, as they say, *in vino veritas*. But I am so very grateful that my friend trusted me enough to blurt out this ugly and painful stumbling block to faith.

My friend is not alone. I have wrestled with this particular concept before and have been disgusted and turned off by Christians cudgeling me with this very passage. The self-righteous smugness of those Christians who want you to know that they've got it all figured out, what with their bumper stickers and tracts, their megaphones and megachurches, their little secret code fish festooning their phone-book ads and key fobs. You know the ones. My most memorable encounter with "them" happened in the dollar store as I admired a collection of saints candles with their ethereal angels, their gruesome suffering saints, their demure virgins and rosy-cheeked, holy babes. As I was trying to decipher the supplication printed in Spanish on the glass of the one with poor, pierced St. Sebastian, a couple passed close behind me and loudly admonished me, "You'll only get to Heaven through the blood and mercy of Jesus the Christ who is the way and the truth – all that [dismissive wave toward the neat rows of candles] is just idolatry, and all of you will burn in Hell if you don't get right with The Lord." Jeez Louise, Dude! I'm just testing my Spanish here, not participating in a black mass, okay?

So my friend, actually almost all of my friends, maintain quite a distance from accepting not only the idea that this Jesus guy knew more about the nature of God than the rest of us, but they doubt the very existence of a loving God altogether. They are genuinely offended

by the swaggering certainty that infects a broad swath of what passes for Christianity today.

So back to my friend and the angry outburst in our local pub. You all know the definition of the conversational riposte, right? It's that perfect response you come up with three hours later while you're washing your back in the shower. That's what this sermon is. My friend said that maybe fifteen years ago, and it's taken me all this time, in my metaphorical shower, to finally hear an answer that rings deep within my soul.

To begin at the very beginning: "*Set your troubled hearts at rest. Trust in God always; trust also in me.*" Jesus is speaking to those who already know him and trust him but are struggling with how radically different the reality of following him is from what they thought it would be. You would think that two thousand years later we would have finally gotten there, but trust is not passed down like blue eyes or curly hair; it must be learned with every generation – so, technically, we are no further along in our spiritual journey than the followers John was writing to in 80 to 100 A.D.

John again: "*I am the way, the truth, and the light; no one comes to the Father except by me.*" And there it is, staring at us full in the face, waiting for us to actually HEAR the words themselves and not overwrite them with stuff out of our experience. Jesus is not telling us that there is no way to God except through him; he is telling us there is no way to the FATHER except through him!!! Feel free to connect with God's Holy Spirit any way you can. Go ahead – pray to Allah, or Yahweh, or the Divine Eye of Cao Dai, or follow the Wisdom of Confucius, or al-Aql al-Kull of the Druze, or the Eck of Eckankar, or Krishna, or Brahma, or Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie I, or the Kami of Shinto, the Tao of Lao-Tzu, or Ahura Mazda revealed by Zoroaster, or any other way that works for you. Live your life within the bounds of those teachings, keeping the ears of your heart open to the whispers and guidance of the Holy Spirit, and all is good. After all, Jesus himself said, "*It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick; I did not come to call the righteous, but the sinners.*" (Mark 2:17)

What John is saying is that if you want to worship a god who loves you the way a father loves his child, if you want to worship a god who is hungry for a relationship with you (and just think about that for a second: the omnipotent, omniscient Being wants YOU, you personally – how mind-blowing is that?!?), if you want to be

in relationship with a god who will strengthen, comfort, and guide you, then come worship this revelation of God, this God the Father that Jesus the Christ knew to be true. How did he know? He prayed. How deeply did he know? Deeply enough to be willing to die rather than deny.

The God Jesus is revealing to us, however, is so not what we expect. The true heartbreak of our faith is that we can barely begin to trust that we are loved by this God-the-Father. We cannot see the splendor, the magnificence of the flaming heart of the Father's love, bright and wondrous as the sun, any more than Moses on Mount Sinai or the apostles at the Transfiguration could look upon the face of God himself. Our idea of father is, inevitably, based on our experiences of the fathers we had, the fathers we know, and the fathers some of us are. As Paul said, "*all have fallen short of the glory of God.*"

I digress for a moment: As you might guess, I was, in fact, my father's beloved child. My father, Smitty to most people, was an absolutely magnificent daddy when I was young. My mother left the family when I was three, and she played a fairly unkind game of tug-of-war with me until a discerning judge gave my dad full custody. This was in 1961, and dads didn't get full custody very often in those days, so that should tell you something right there. Daddy put me into an informal foster care arrangement for a couple of years with an elderly couple as he struggled to get his lawyer paid off and his business off the ground. Though I lived with them, my dad came to their house every single night after dinner to give me my bath, read with me, and tuck me into bed. If the weather was fine, we would go for a ride, usually ending up in Belmont Shore, walking up one side of 2nd Street and down the other, ice-cream cones in hand, just people-watching and window-shopping, chatting about everything and nothing. These are truly the happiest memories of my childhood, and certainly the basis for my overly passionate relationship with coffee-flavored ice cream.

Eventually, he got an apartment for us and a housekeeper, and we lived on our own for a couple of years. He was dating and introduced me to a couple of "contenders," actually proposing to one woman who had children of her own. I remember the day he came into the room where I was happily playing with her children and somberly scooped me up into his arms, blindly searching for my abandoned

shoes and socks, carrying me out snuggled up against his chest, and tenderly tucking me into the truck. As we drove home, tears ran down his face, scaring me half to death. I asked, and he answered: During the visit, she had casually suggested that after the wedding “perhaps Suzy could go live with her mother.” My father simply stood up, fetched me, quietly stepped through her screen door, and never saw or spoke with her again. That was the pinnacle of my dad’s fatherhood. When I look to my idea of a loving father God, I use that moment as my glimmer of understanding about what perfect parental love looks like. Was my dad always that father? Of course not. But he was that father in that moment, and that’s what I use to reach into the love of God the Father.

A popular phrase in modern Christendom is “Please don’t judge the Christ by the Christians.” To paraphrase, I would like to propose “Please don’t judge God the Father by your own dad.” Like everything on this side of the veil, our fathers are but shadowy representations of the perfection of the Beyond. The further our fathers were from true communion with the Lord, our God, the dimmer, darker, and more distorted the picture of fatherhood becomes. Some fathers saw only the power; some only the vengeance; some only the justice and none of the mercy; and some, tragically, were so willfully defiant, so lost themselves, that to look into their faces was to see a glimpse of the very face of evil itself. If this was your experience with your father, I am so very sorry. How hard it must be for you to accept and trust the loving father God.

Some are so put off by the language that they insist on changing the gender, and I get it, I do. But the language Jesus used was, and still is, perfect for the time and place of his experience. Even today in the Middle East, the relationship that matters more than any other is the relationship between the father and the son. Is this fair? Equitable? Feminist? Nope. But that’s the way it was and that’s what the audience understood. Women in the here (and I do mean “here”) and now have the luxury of owning their own intellects, wealth, and reproductive futures; this was not the norm for Jesus’ time. In fact, it was so unusual that many of the women who did support Jesus’ ministry were actually mentioned by name! I think Jesus himself was something like a feminist (at least for his time); the rest of his world, however, absolutely was not and this was the mindset of the ears he was speaking into. Wives had virtually no power and could be, and were, divorced. Daughters were lost to the family at marriage or

could be sold into slavery to pay off debts. But sons ... sons were the arrows in the quiver, the strength and the protection, the muscle of the family, the pension and retirement plan.

Most fathers who have at least an inkling of the divine nature of love itself will be more like a shifting kaleidoscope of love, fear, tenderness, power, mercy, despair, impatience, thoughtlessness, selfishness, and even cruelty. You know: human. The more attentive and receptive they are to the love and will of God the Father, the more time they will spend in the love, tenderness, and mercy part of the spectrum.

Back again to John: *“There are many dwelling-places in my Father’s house ...”* I believe that with all my heart! I believe every person who hears and obeys the voice of the Holy Spirit has a dwelling-place in God’s house – and I don’t think he’s just saying that each one of us gets his or her own room. I think every person who hears the Holy Spirit gets a spot, and I, and presumably you, because you’re here too, want the dwelling-place that’s been prepared by Jesus, and not the place that’s been prepared by Abraham or Muhammad or Krishna or the Buddha or any other deity or prophet you know of.

I don’t want to be in the Abraham/Yahweh section; I don’t want to spend all of eternity trying to live so righteously and carefully, forever attempting to earn God’s love and approval. From Psalm 18: *“The LORD has dealt with me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands he has rewarded me. For I have kept the ways of the LORD; I am not guilty of turning from my God. All his laws are before me; I have not turned away from his decrees. I have been blameless before him and have kept myself from sin. The LORD has rewarded me according to my righteousness, according to the cleanness of my hands in his sight.”* (Psalm 18:20-24, NIV) Have you ever been in a relationship like that? Loved ... just as long as you’re perfect? Just the thought of trying to live that way overwhelms me with exhaustion. I think the reason King David was so powerful a figure for Israel was that he saw through the rigidity of this. He was able to live within the spirit of law, and not just the letter of the law. He sinned mightily, repented truly, and loved Yahweh with all his heart, all his soul, and all his might. He and Yahweh had a relationship – a father and beloved son relationship. No wonder Jesus had to have been of David’s house; he was David’s spiritual heir, bringing the flower of David’s relational love of God to full fruit.

I also don't want to spend all of eternity in the Muhammad section either, reciting formulaic prayers five times a day, scrupulously observing every rule and regulation, believing that if I just submit abjectly enough I will be worthy of my place in Allah's kingdom. I especially don't want to be there because, from the tiny bit of what I understand of the Koran, my own entry into paradise is contingent on my complete obedience to my husband. Can anyone who knows me see where that might be a problem?

I want to spend my eternity in the Jesus section, knowing that I am God's beloved child – knowing that there is forgiveness for my transgressions if I but see them, acknowledge them, and turn away from them as soon as I am aware that I have, in fact, transgressed. I want to live in my Father's house, as my Father's heir, as my Father's beloved child.

More important than the afterlife, however, is that I want to live this way in *this* life, in this broken world, for that changes everything. Who, knowing they are loved truly and completely, is not improved by the knowledge of that love? Who, knowing they are loved, cannot help but let that love spill out over everyone they come in contact with? Who, knowing they are loved, is incapable of loving others?

My thoughts do sometimes turn to the afterlife, though it is not really the focus of my faith life. I love the idea of the moment every Jew, every Muslim, every law-bound Christian arrives at the Pearly Gates and discovers that the God they have revered and feared is, in fact, so much more forgiving and gracious than they ever imagined. Feast your mind on this image for a moment: the one who has lived his life in rigid, unyielding obedience to The Word as he has been taught to understand it – being held against God-the-Father's chest, weeping with relief and joy, as he finally understands that the God he has submitted to so fearfully and scrupulously all his life was just waiting to love him and to be loved in return.

Perhaps this comes as no surprise to those of you who know me, but I don't want to see them burn in Hell for all eternity because they didn't or couldn't accept Jesus' message of the loving Father God during this lifetime. One lifetime in the Hell that this world can be is plenty! I want to see them come into the mercy, love, and grace of the loving Father and have their souls melted by the glowing tenderness, the radiant joy, the ineffable sweetness of the love that will not be denied. I imagine myself enjoying, as I watch, their regret, their

shame, their embarrassment when the All-Knowing One looks deep into their eyes and says, “Why did you not trust my love?” It’s called *schadenfreude* (trust the Germans to have a word for it), and I’m particularly fond of it. The only thing that tempers my glee is the sure knowledge that I, too, will have to look deep into those eyes and answer the very same question myself – and I’m already embarrassed at the many times I failed to trust in his love.

We really are just like small children in this world. Because we can only see this life, we struggle to trust what’s beyond. My favorite preacher once said that compared to eternity, our time here on earth is like one night in a cheap hotel. We, knee-high to God (if that), cannot see far enough or always remember that this is not all there is. So sometimes we forget and we get all territorial and grasping, sure that our rewards here are the only rewards, that the bottomless loneliness and sorrow here will be our portions forever, that our triumphs will be the stuff of legends. Or maybe that’s just me. What we need is a moment up on Dad’s shoulders to see the show up on the stage, and not just the forest of legs and back pockets that we are usually consigned to. We need a breath of that rarified air, the view from the penthouse – and once in a while we get it, most often through prayer.

That view, that knowledge changes us, and changes us for the better. We become both kinder and gentler, while being bolder and stronger. We become the sort of people our friends and acquaintances can trust with their fears and their doubts, especially about the nature of God. If we are loved and cherished, we are then able to love and cherish others in return. Every kindness, every tenderness, every sweet word and thoughtful gesture we bestow just flows because we know we are well and truly loved by the source of all love.

*“I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except by me.”* That is not egotism. That is not arrogance. That is a promise – a promise so irresistibly beautiful and impossibly true that Jesus himself was willing to bet his eternal life on it ... and so am I.

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, we are told we are made of the dust of stars and the ashes of this earth. No matter what we are made of, what we want to be is loved, claimed – to know that we are wholly yours. You have given us this life, now we give this life back over to you. We continue to pray with the words Jesus gave us: *“Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.”*