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SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY CONTINUING EDUCATION
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Transcript Segment, Part 1

“Praying the ‘Our Father’ with Jesus”

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Other great religious figures left behind writings, left behind liturgies, left behind codes of law to govern their community. Jesus didn't leave us much. We have a lot of writings about Jesus from the early Church. But from him, himself, we don't have much. The two things I've come, in my own desire to meet Jesus the theologian, the two places I keep coming back to are the Lord's Prayer, which I think, among the texts of the New Testament, we can have some confidence that this was a prayer that Jesus said, maybe not the same way every time. Maybe that's why we have variations, which I'll discuss in a minute, but that these are probably Jesus's real words.

And then the other thing we have is the Hebrew Bible. So when I say Old Testament, I'm talking about the book that Catholics use, which is expanded. It's not just the Hebrew Bible plus a number of ancient Greek documents that became, for us, canonical. But for Jesus, the Hebrew texts were the ones he might have known the best. It's kind of thrilling to read those and think, my eyes are passing over the same words that Jesus's eyes may have passed over, if he could read, or the same words that he might have heard proclaimed, more likely, in a synagogue or among friends, or in discussion. There's a thrill to that for me. And that's maybe the intuitive kick in the gut that makes me keep this project going, even though, as a scholarly project, it's pretty hard to do because, again, we're not working from much evidence. But certainly, as a person of faith, to be connected to Christ in this way is something I often find very moving.

I want to talk about what we really do have to work with. Jesus didn't have a Bible, obviously, as we do today. I meant to bring one. But he didn't have books, the codex, as we have today is probably not what he really have understood it; he had scrolls. It's conceivable that Jesus was not literate. It's entirely conceivable that Jesus was not literate. Luke seems to think that he was, but only Luke mentions Jesus's literacy. There's that great scene in John's Gospel, where Jesus, interrupting the Pharisees, that great scene in

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to himself. That's pretty significant, when you think about Augustine's literary output. The fact that he could only read by reciting a text out loud is pretty astonishing. The way we separate words and sentences and use capitalization, that's the invention of medieval monks who, because of vows of silence, were not able to read those texts out loud.

Speaking of those medieval monks, while I was at Johns Hopkins, the creative writing department did a study on how different reading is today from when it was at other points in history. What they determined was that a person who sits on a public transit conveyance and reads all of the advertisements in maybe 75 seconds, is probably reading more in those 75 seconds than a medieval monk would have read in a month.

Reading, even in those days, even among people who were committed to preservation of texts, was not something that was engaged as much as we do, or even practiced in the way we understand it.

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It's a striking departure from the covenantal language, which is political language, which is the language of a sovereign having to deal with the crimes of an underling. It's a striking departure from that. But the prophets had this model, and they employed it again and again and again.

The other place we see it in the Psalms is where God makes himself, God makes the divine self, the father of orphans and widows. I use this particular line from Psalm 68: "Father of orphans, protector of widows, is God in his holy habitation." This is not an uncommon way for the Psalms to describe God's fatherhood, specifically of orphans and widows. Jesus certainly loves the image of God as Father, and I think he's probably after the mercy that's being expressed there. But if that's the case, he could not have been blind to the fact that the fatherhood of God is so often expressed in the context of orphans and widows. This would have been a very natural union of ideas.

God is also described as mother in a number of cases, and I wonder if this isn't, also, some where behind Jesus's mind. Comforting mother in Isaiah 63:16, nursing mother in Hosea 11:3-4, and, my favorite, Deuteronomy, a

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disciples, to recognize that no, there's not really much here that I can take. Now, I grant you, my grandmother worships this God. My Sicilian grandmothers both, I think, would be perfectly comfortable with this God. He's also not a war God. This is less attested in the Hebrew Bible, but it's there. So Joshua 10:11: "As the Amorites fled before Israel, while they were going down the slope of Beth-horon, the Lord threw down huge stones from heaven as far as Azekah, and they died. And there were more who died because of the hailstones than the Israelites killed with a sword." This is our God as a war God. It's there. The Gideons put a copy of this narrative in every hotel room in America. Think about that. These are things that trouble me.

Jesus is completely uninterested, as far as I can tell, in this image of the Father, this image of God. He doesn't draw from this in his preaching. It doesn't seem like the Evangelists draw from this. Now, the writer of Revelation is going to depict God in many of these terms. So the New Testament, the wider canon, will probably have some kind of inspiration drawn from these images. But at least when we're looking specifically at the Our Father, it's the image of mercy, it's the image of fatherhood. It's the image of tender love that Jesus seems to be inspired by and is drawing from the Hebrew Bible.