

One of the incredible things about Christianity is the image of God as Father.

In our Gospel lesson, the disciples ask Jesus how to pray. And Jesus says something we take for granted. He tells them to call God, "Father." He doesn't tell them to address God as Almighty Lord, or as King of the Universe. He tells them to call God, "Abba," which in English is Father/Papa/Dad. That's a term of incredible intimacy.

And we use it so much, we forget how amazing that is. We say by rote, "Our Father, who art in heaven..."

But consider for a moment how amazing that term is. Father. We are invited to address God as Father or Papa or Dad. We are invited to come to God not as subjects or creatures, but as children. Our Father...

We either forget this or take it for granted. But it's amazing. God is our perfect Father, our perfect Parent, the God who cares for us as a Mother cares for her children. It's so important that we don't miss out on this parental/fatherly/motherly love that God has for us.

I think there are two pitfalls to seeing God this way.

Number 1 is our other images of God. Our primary image of God is often as judge, or policeman, or king. Growing up in the Bible belt, the cultural image of God was often very stern or strict. A God is ready to send you to hell for the smallest slip, for the infraction of the most minor law. That kind of image of God is hard to get away from.

As a priest, I've talked on many occasions with folks who are just plain scared. They're scared of God. They're afraid that God is just looking for an excuse to condemn them. They feel that what they've done is unforgivable. The irony is that these same people are often decent parents.

So I often ask the question along the lines of, "If your child treated you the way you're treating God, would you end your relationship with your child forever and never want to see them again?"

The answer is usually, "Of course not."

And then the question arises, "Why do you think God is less forgiving to you than you are to your children?"

The truth is, God loves us more than any human parent could ever love us. God loves us more than we could ever love our own children. Then why do we think God would treat us worse than we would treat our own children?

That's what Jesus is asking in our Gospel. "Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion?"<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lk 11:11-12

You can almost hear Jesus saying, 'Duh! If you people, imperfect as you are, know how to do good things for your children, how much more your Heavenly Father do good things for you! God will take care of you. God will love you. God will give you what you need. God will send his own Spirit to be with you and to be a part of you.'

God is your Father, Jesus is saying. So ask your Father for the things you need. And trust him to give you what you need: your daily bread, forgiveness of sins, help to resist temptation. Come before God as his child, and trust in God's parental love. Don't let other images of God stand in your way.

But there is another thing that stands in the way of relating to God as our Father. That impediment is our relationship to our human parents. God is perfect. Our human parents are not. Our parents run the full gamut from 'somewhat less than perfect' all the way down the spectrum to 'downright abusive.' And no one has a perfect childhood because no one has perfect parents.

It reminds me of a cartoon. There's an enormous auditorium. There's a large banner which reads, "The National Association of the Children of Normal Parents." And sitting in this huge auditorium are 3 people. The point is that none of us has perfect parents. All of us carry some scars from our childhood. And all of us who are parents undoubtedly scar our own children to a greater or lesser degree.

I remember one time when Jimmy was 5. He was into dinosaurs at the time, so I thought I'd show him a couple scenes from Jurassic Park. The mild scenes, before the movie gets scary. He loved it. I was going to stop the movie. He asked me to keep going. We got to the scary part where the Tyrannosaurus was on the rampage. I asked Jimmy if he wanted me to stop it. He said, "No, keep going." Then the T-rex was knocking over the SUVs. But Jimmy said, "Keep going." Then the T-rex knocked over the building and ate the attorney. And Jimmy said, "Stop the movie, Dad." And I thought, "I've warped the boy for life."

No human parent is perfect. We know that best human parents make mistakes. We also know that the worst human parents can do major damage to their children.

So when we speak of God as Father, as Mother, as Parent, our perspectives are often clouded and distorted by our all too human parents. We often transfer our negative images of our parents on to God. When I was growing up, Dad was certainly loving. But he would sometimes be distant or withdrawn. So guess what my perceptions of God were? God must be distant and withdrawn. Surprise, surprise, surprise.

The problem with this is we are looking at things from the bottom up rather than the top down. We use our human parents to try to figure out what God is like. But the reality is, human parents at their worst do not reflect anything of what God is like. And even the best human parent on their best day gives just the tiniest inkling of God's perfect love for us.

Instead, we need to look the other direction.

In our sequence hymn this morning, the hymn opened with the line, " Our Father, by whose Name all fatherhood is known."<sup>2</sup>

God is the model of perfection. God's Fatherhood is perfect Fatherhood. And God's perfect parental love is always there to fill in the blanks that no human parent could possibly fill.

Again, as a priest, from time to time I have talked with folks who have had abusive parents. And I've heard more than once from folks with abusive fathers that it's difficult for them to pray to God as Father because of the negative associations they've had with fatherhood.

In such cases I usually offer two thoughts.

#1. If your relationship to a human father has been so horrible that you can't pray to God as Father—then try another title. Pray to God as Mother, or Parent, or Lord, or Rock—there are tons of other biblical images for God in addition to Father. If Father has been so tainted by a sinful human father, then find another title for your prayers.

But I also will usually offer thought #2. God is there to be the perfect parent that our earthly parents could never be. God is there to bring healing and wholeness to our brokenness. Perhaps you can find a way to pray to God as Perfect Father, the True Father, the one who can fill in the gap and the hole left by an abusive human father.

God wants to be our perfect, loving Father. God wants us to regard ourselves as his beloved sons and daughters. And God only asks one thing of us: that we seek to be in relationship with him. And even before we're aware of the relationship from our end, God already loves us from his end.

I think back to the late nineties when my children were born.

I had been loved by a father growing up. But holding my children in my arms was the first time I had loved AS a father.

I was their father. They didn't know it at the time. They had no idea who I was. They had no idea what the world that they were in was like. But that didn't matter.

My love for my children didn't depend upon them reciprocating my love. My love for them didn't depend upon their knowing me. My love for them was there simply because they were my beloved son and my beloved daughter. They didn't know me, but that didn't change my love for them. That didn't change my desire to love them and care for them and bring them to know me.

That's the kind of love God has for us, only in an infinitely grander and more perfect way.

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<sup>2</sup> Hymnal #587

God wants to have relationship with us. One of the joys of being a young parent is holding your children. As Jimmy and Lisa grew older, they no longer wanted to be held as much. And there were times when they were younger teenagers that they didn't want to have anything to do with us. And now as adults they've growing more and more independent. And that's the way it should be.

But none of this changes Renee's and my love for them, or our desire to have relationship with them. We can't hold them or hold onto them like we used to. But we still want to love them, and spend time with them, and be part of their lives.

God also longs to hold us, to have us sit still in his presence and spend time with him, to allow ourselves spiritually to sit in God's lap, and be enfolded by God's embrace. Our prayer time is not only a time for us to ask. It is also a time to be still and be enveloped in God's presence.

Jesus tells us that we are to come before God as God's children. "When you pray, say: Abba/Papa/Dad/Father." Our Abba longs to be with us. Our heavenly Father wants to spend time with us. Our loving God wants to have relationship with us, and embrace us, and hold us tight.

God loves you. Trust that love. Be enveloped by that love. Abide in that love.

When you pray, say, "Father."