

“Our Father”

Psalm 103; Mathew 6:9-13; Romans 8:14-30

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Ever since I had children, I’ve noticed that a lot of people have very low expectations for Fathers. I’ll be the park with our boys or walking them to school and daycare, just doing the bare minimum obligations of parenting, and people passing by will make comments like “Oh, stuck on babysitting duty, huh?” as if my children are just such a burden, such a tremendous inconvenience to me. Or I’ll go into a public washroom with a very stinky toddler, only to find out that there are no change tables in the men’s washroom, only in the women’s, because when would a man ever need to change a diaper?

Once when Calvin was very small, only a couple months old, I took him to the store to get some diapers and things, and as soon as we got to the register, the cashier spotted Calvin and started talking directly to him, ignoring me completely. “Oh, hello baby! What a sweet baby! Baby is stuck with daddy today! Baby doesn’t want daddy - baby wants mommy! Daddy doesn’t know what to do with baby! Daddy is stupid and useless!”

And she kept going - she really started tearing into me in this cutesy-wutesy voice, describing to my infant son in detail my complete lack of parenting competence and basic survival skills, as if I was just a brainless shaved gorilla who had somehow escaped the zoo, stolen a human baby and wandered into the local shopping district. Moms are held to this impossibly high standard, they’re

expected to get everything right, all the time, pull anything and everything their children could ever possibly need out of their purse, while Dads are treated as benign doofuses who just need to show up with pants on, and we get a parenting pass. And I can kind of understand why Fathers are held to such a low standard, because even when the bar is so low, so many fathers still don't clear it.

Abusive fathers, neglectful fathers, absentee fathers – the damage that can be done and has been done by fathers towards their children is tremendous, and the scars can take a lifetime to heal, if they ever do. When so many fathers fail to show up at all, or cause pain and misery for their children instead of love and care, it starts to make sense why just being there is seen as a win. If the models of Fatherhood we have are either Homer Simpson or Darth Vader, it's no wonder that people don't expect much from Fathers.

So when we open our Bibles and look at the Lord's Prayer, and the first thing we run into is this instruction from Jesus to call God "Our Father", what should we do? In a world that has such a low opinion of Fathers, that considers them at best ineffective and at worst monstrous, what do we do with a prayer that calls God "Our Father"? I suppose the easy answer, particularly for those of us who were blessed with wonderful Fathers, is to tell anyone who shies away from this language to just get over it.

God said it, I believe it, end of story. There's an attractive sense of certainty and finality to that approach, I know, but it certainly isn't a satisfying solution to the problem to people who can't speak the word Father without getting a rush of bad memories and harmful emotions flooding back on them. As the apostle Paul told

the church in Corinth, if anything I do causes another believer to fall away or makes it more difficult for them to follow Christ, so long as it is not something essential to the message of the gospel, I should not do it. The last thing a Christian wants to do is set up a stumbling block for another believer, so if the word Father has become a stumbling block for millions of hurting people, how can I continue to use it?

The opposite reaction, then, is to stop using it, to go through the Bible with scissors and glue and start snipping out all the offending words and replacing them with something more palatable. The obvious choice is simply to switch Father with Mother; since God exists beyond human conceptions of gender, both Father and Mother are equally valid, and it fits with other images of God elsewhere in the Bible, such as the mother hen gathering her chicks under her wings.

But this doesn't really solve the problem; there will be other Christians who have had abusive, neglectful or absentee mothers who will find this just as much of a stumbling block as Father was. And really, every other possible substitute word you can use to describe God comes fraught with its own difficulties; calling God our King, or Word, or Rock, all of these metaphors that we use to try and explain who God is, they're all imperfect, they all carry the weight of the brokenness of our world, they all capture one side of who God is but obscure God in another way.

We have made such a mess of our world and our lives that half the words and objects in existence conjure up some bad memories for somebody, and the more positive and powerful and intimate these things are, the more likely that our sin has twisted them into something negative and hurtful and obscene.

And here we come to the heart of the problem – all of the words that we try to use to speak of God are broken because *we broke them*. We are the ones who have taken the gift of fatherhood and used it to hurt and abuse the children entrusted to us. We are the ones who have set up kings to be tyrants over the land and its people, who have used words to wound and destroy, who have turned the very rocks of the earth into resources to be exploited and weapons to be turned against our neighbours.

If the images we use to describe God are destructive, that is because they are our images, and we are a destructive people. There are no words we can use to describe God that we have not already used to describe the sinful, polluted world we have built around us. The only language we have to speak about God is human language, and humans are broken. There is no way we can speak to God, for God, about God, without letting our brokenness shine through.

And yet, even in the midst of our brokenness, even when we are unable to find any words to speak to God, to speak about God, God still chooses to speak to us. Our God cuts through the ruins of our language and the duplicity of our speech and speaks tenderly to us, God enters in to our world and out of our brokenness God brings wholeness, our vocabulary of death is transformed into words of life.

Jesus Christ, who lived among us and spoke our language and shared the challenges and hardships of humanity with us, Jesus understands that human fathers fail, Jesus knows the mess we have made out of fatherhood, and that is exactly why He has invited us to call His own father “Our Father”.

Jesus offers us entry into His divine family, so that when we see the relationship that exists within the trinity, the bond of love between God our creator and Christ our redeemer, suddenly we can see our own human relationships in an entirely new way, in an entirely new light. We can learn what fatherhood is truly meant to be in the arms of His Heavenly Father who becomes our Heavenly Father, to cry out “Abba” and hear God answer “this too is my beloved child.”

You see, the very fact that we recognize how broken and insufficient and polluted our earthly fathers are means that we know that true fatherhood is something different, something more, and when Jesus invites us to call God Father, we can for the first time understand what Father really means, not in the sinful language of humanity but in the language of heaven.

In God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ we can know the first Father, the one who was Father to the Son before humanity ever existed, and in that light all our earthly ideas of what a father is, pale and twisted imitations of a perfect original, they can be transformed, they can be baptised and redeemed to more closely resemble their great original who is Our Father in Christ.

And whenever we call on Our Father through the grace of Our Brother Jesus Christ, we declare ourselves to be part of that holy family alongside all others who pray or have prayed or ever will pray that prayer, because anyone else who calls God father is our sibling, anyone who takes Christ Jesus up on His invitation to join the family is part of our family, and we are together with them. In calling God “Our Father” we are both enabled to love our family as we are loved by God, and we are also given a whole new family to practice on; the boundaries of genetics are exploded by the power of God’s adoptive love.

When we pray “Our Father”, we pray as a family, as part of the community of saints, past, present and future, all those who have ever prayed that prayer, all those who will ever pray that prayer, we are all joined together through the love of Jesus Christ as one family of one Heavenly Father. The only words we have to pray with are broken words, human words, and yet we have our God’s promise that even in our brokenness, God hears, God speaks, God becomes our Father and joins us to Jesus Christ and through Christ to the world around us.

When we pray “Our Father,” we pray in the hope that all humanity will become part of that family, that all the brokenness of our earthly fathers will be healed by Our Father who is in Heaven. Today, may we come as we are, bring all our brokenness and all our failings, and come to meet our Father in Heaven, to know in the light of God’s love who we are meant to be. In the name of Jesus Christ – Amen!