

## I Believe in God the Father

[Matthew 7:7-11](#)

The Apostles' Creed

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Someone remained silent when we recited the Apostles' Creed a few minutes ago. You were silent because you find it difficult to pronounce the word "Father" in the first sentence, "I believe in God the Father." And you find it difficult to say "Father" because you feel that it reinforces the notion of male dominance.

And let's admit it: for long centuries masculine forms of rationality, pride, and sheer physical dominance have been projected onto God and then reflected back onto men in their families, in their work, in government, and in the church. Men reasoned that if God the Father is in control of the universe, then fathers and other males must be in charge of things here on earth. Understandably, many women, seeking equality with men, would prefer to address God in ways that do not support male privilege and domination.

Others object to calling God "Father" because their own fathers abused them, physically, sexually, or emotionally. Boys and young men, girls and young women who have been abused by their fathers or by pastors whom they were taught to call Father must find it exceedingly painful to recite the Apostles' Creed, "I believe in God the Father." They too seek alternative names that do not trigger dark fears and aggravate emotional scars.

I for one want to hear those voices and to understand their hurts, their frustration, even their rage. It is not enough to say, "The Bible says it, I believe it, and that settles it!" For in fact the Bible describes God under many metaphors. There are, for example, many feminine portrayals of God in the Scriptures. In Deuteronomy 32, God is not only the Rock who fathered you, a masculine image, but the God who gave you birth, a feminine image. In Isaiah 49:15 God is like a nursing mother: "Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you." The same image appears in Isaiah 66:13, "As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you." On Palm Sunday, Jesus addressed Jerusalem with maternal regret, "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" (Matthew 23:37) Based on these biblical passages some suggest that God might properly be addressed as Mother as well as Father.

In addition to these feminine images, there are many other descriptions for God in the Scriptures. The Old Testament portrays God as God Most High, God Almighty, I Am Who I Am, the Holy One of Israel, and The Lord of hosts. The New Testament speaks of God as master, savior, and redeemer. So why must we stick with "Father" in the Creed? Why not God as Creator, or as Lord, or as Redeemer?

With all deference toward those who find Father difficult, and with respect to others who suggest alternative names, we confess faith in God the Father because that is the only mode of address for God found on the lips of Jesus in the Gospels. Jesus, in his teaching and parables, gives us other titles for God—landowner, master, king, and judge—but none of these is used to address God. When Jesus addresses God, it is always as "Father," or "My Father." When Jesus teaches us to address God, it is as "Our Father." And when he speaks of our relationship with God in today's text, it is as "Your Father."

We Christians always begin with Jesus. Jesus is God's Word, God's official web site, and we check our personal spiritual web sites to be sure they comport with his. We surrender our wills to his will, we submit our vocabulary to his vocabulary, so when Jesus directs us to call God "Father," we listen and obey.

For those who still find it difficult to obey, remember that the term "Father" is a metaphor, not a literal description for God. Of course all human language is metaphorical. Every word we utter is only a pointer to the real thing. The word "tree" is not a tree, but it creates an image in our minds of a trunk, limbs and leaves. The word "fire" is not the real thing, but if you shout "fire!" in a crowded room, everyone knows instantly that they must run away from it. "Father" is not the real God, but when Jesus speaks of "your Father in heaven" he wants us to run toward God, because God is like a Father who gives "good things to those who ask him."

And if the term "Father" is a metaphor, then like all metaphors it breaks down at a critical point, and Jesus knows it full well. Listen again as he addresses the fathers in the crowd that day: "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children . . ." "You who are evil." not a very flattering portrayal, is it? Are we evil? Isn't that a word we reserve for conspicuously bad people like drug dealers and dictators? Yes, but when even the most moral of us stands in the presence of God who alone is all good, we must with the publican in the temple beat our breast and say, "God be merciful to me a sinner." So the analogy between earthly fathers and our Heavenly Father fails because when it comes right down to it you cannot compare God with me or with any other father. I wasn't there for many of my daughters' special events, their first Little League game, their school plays and concerts. I was working six days a week and going to committee meetings and other functions in the evening, and didn't spend the time I should have with my family. And neglect, after all, is a form of abuse, for in a child's mind it says, "Father doesn't care."

But God cares: "How much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" Jesus says. Dale Bruner calls this God's "breathtaking readiness to give his asking children what is good for them." And that means that the Father in whom we profess our faith in the Apostles' Creed is no parsimonious skinflint. God is a spendthrift, and you are the children on whom this Father loves to lavish gifts.

Many years ago a little boy stopped to talk to a fisherman on the banks of the Mississippi River. The boy was full of questions and the fisherman answered them all with great patience, no doubt thinking all the time of his own boys, now fully grown. Soon they heard a

whistle, and there came the River Queen paddling downstream. The little boy started shouting, "Give me a ride . . . give me a ride." Well, the fisherman tried to calm him down. "That boat isn't going to stop for you, young man! The captain has a schedule to keep, he has passengers to deliver in New Orleans, and he can't just stop and give rides to little boys." But the child kept on yelling, "Give me a ride." And to the fisherman's amazement, the boat slowed, turned toward shore, bumped gently onto a sandbar, and lowered the gangplank. The boy scampered on board and the boat pulled back into the river. Suddenly a tiny head appeared above the rail. "Mister," the boy shouted, "I knew this boat would stop for me. The captain is my father."

The God in whom you believe, or in whom you only half-believe, that God is Father of the universe. And if you don't yet believe; if, with the fisherman you think the universe steams on by, unheeding of your little voice, then I challenge you to call out. Use any name you wish—Higher Power, Creator, Supreme Being, the Unknown God—it makes no difference. God has already moved toward you, the gangplank is already down, and the Captain awaits you on deck. Climb aboard, and in time you too will be able to say, "The Captain is my Father."