

The Father in Heaven

Matthew 6:7-13

Jesus' Extended Family
Dr. Thomas A. Erickson
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There is a "get acquainted" exercise I often use with persons who are meeting each other for the first time. It consists of several non-threatening questions that each person answers in turn. The first is, "Where did you live between the ages of seven and twelve?" Some will respond with the name of a single town or city, because their family was rooted and stable. Others will name two or three place names because their parents responded to military orders or corporate transfers. What about you? Where did you live between the ages of seven and twelve?

The second question is, "How did you heat your home during those years?" Depending on the age of the participants, the answers may range from coal and wood to gas and electricity. And some will answer that they simply don't know. Their home was always warm, but they never thought to ask why. What is your answer? How did you heat your home during those years?

The third question is, "Where was the center of warmth between the ages of seven and twelve?" Again, the replies are diverse. Some will mention a place, the kitchen or the family room or even the floor vent where heat rose up from the basement furnace. Others will speak of a person, their mother or father, a grandparent or the next door neighbor. Some confess that there was no center of warmth in their home because of an unpleasant divorce or the death of a parent. What is your answer? Where was the center of warmth in your home at that time?

After asking the first three questions I explain that we have been tracing the sources of security during those formative years of our lives. Early on security comes from parental care and feeding. Later we may seek additional security in a friend or an uncle- or aunt-figure. Somewhere around age 18 we leave the nest and strike out on our own. We leave behind the shelter of a bedroom and the warmth of a parent's embrace. So we make friends at college or in the office. But then our friends move or we get transferred, and we must start all over again. Eventually our parents die, and we are bereft of their love and protection. So our search for security goes on, in some cases for a lifetime.

Having said all that, I ask a fourth question: "When did God become more than just a word to you?" All other sources of security are transient, temporary, short-lived. Only God can provide the bedrock security we need, so I now ask the question of you: when did God become more than just a word to you?

According to Jesus, God is not only more than a word; God is more than any god we can possibly imagine, and less. For if the word "god" stirs up images of a deity so majestic, so holy, and so wholly other that god is inaccessible, unapproachable, and unavailable, then Jesus invites us to consider that the true God is less than that, more intimate than that, more close than that, more personal than that. "Pray then in this way, 'Our Father in heaven.'"¹

Jesus spoke and taught in the Aramaic language and the common Aramaic word for father was "Abba." According to Mark 14:36, Jesus addressed God as "Abba" when he prayed in Gethsemane on the last night of his life. So we may be confident that the term Jesus taught his disciples to use in The Lord's Prayer was also "Abba:" "Our Abba in heaven." It's imperative that we hear Jesus invite us to use this word, because "Abba" is a term of intimacy and endearment. Think of the most intimate childhood name you called your mother or father. Whatever it was, Abba is just as intimate. Every language has a term of endearment for one's father: papa, fatie, tatay, daddy. But whereas we usually drop those terms when we grow up, people in Biblical times did not. A mature son or daughter still called their father "Abba," still celebrated the closeness, the intimacy of the father-child relationship.

If you are a parent you remember waiting eagerly for your child's first word, hoping it would be either "mama" or "daddy." Why? Because those simple syllables reflect the love we lavish on our children, our care and commitment, our strength and security. Happy the child who receives such a legacy of love, because those who do not know their parents as mama and daddy may spend their entire lives searching for their identity: "Who am I?" and for their security: "Where do I belong?"

And when it comes to God, our relationship with our parents is often decisive. If our earthly parents are distant and judgmental, if they criticize us for the slightest infractions and withhold praise when we do well, then it will be difficult to believe that God is anything but a cosmic tyrant bent on robbing us of our joy. But if our homes are warm and trusting, if we are told again and again how special we are, it will not be difficult to believe that God has our very best at heart, that God's love is steadfast and unending.

And that is our Lord's intention when he teaches us to call God "Abba." It is a name no other rabbi had ever used of God. God was thought to be too high and holy for such a tender term as "Abba." But Jesus knew better. And out of his own intimate experience with God, Jesus invites us to pray, "Abba, Father." He would have us know that we are special to God, precious and beloved of God, our Abba Father.

And please do not overlook the plural pronoun "our:" "Our Abba." In fact, all the pronouns in the Lord's Prayer are plural. Nowhere in this prayer do the words "I," "me," or "mine" appear. God is "our" Father, so we are brothers and sisters in the Father's family. That means, in turn, that I will never ask anything of Abba/Father that I will not readily share with you. I will not pray to be enriched personally or to gain some private advantage. Rather, I will pray for patience to be a worthy father so my children will know that God is patient; for integrity to be a reliable leader so that this congregation may believe that God is reliable; for wisdom to be a helpful friend so every person I meet may be assured that God is helpful. In short, the Lord's Prayer puts me in touch not only with the open heart of the heavenly Father, but also with the empty hands of the Father's extended family, hands that may be filled by Abba,

Father. We receive not to hoard but to share. We pray "Abba, Father," not to elbow our way to the head of the line, but to wrap our arms around people near and far who need God and who need us.

Let me rephrase the question I asked earlier. I asked then, "When did God become more than just a word to you?" I ask now, "When did this God, the Abba/Father of Jesus, become more than just a word to you?" When did God become your Abba, your intimate Friend?

William Barclay tells the story of a victorious Roman Emperor marching through Rome with his captives and all the booty he had brought back from the wars. The streets are lined with cheering crowds, and the legionnaires have all they can do to hold them back. At one point the parade passes in front of the reviewing stand where the Empress sits with her youngest son. As the Emperor drew near the little boy jumped off the platform, burrowed through the crowd, tried to dodge between the legs of a legionnaire, to run out to meet his father's chariot. The legionnaire stopped him and swung him up in his arms. "You can't do that, boy," he said. "Don't you know who's in that chariot? That's the Emperor." The little boy laughed. "He may be your Emperor," he said, "but he's my father."

God may be Emperor of the universe, the Almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth. But Jesus invites you to call God Abba. God is your Father, and you are free to run to Abba any time you wish. No one, least of all Abba, will ever hold you back.