

¹ “Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God^[a]; believe also in me. ² My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. ⁴ You know the way to the place where I am going.”

⁵ Thomas said to him, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?”

⁶ Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷ If you really know me, you will know^[b] my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.”

⁸ Philip said, “Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.”

⁹ Jesus answered: “Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? ¹⁰ Don’t you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. ¹¹ Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the works themselves. ¹² Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. ¹³ And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴ You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.

-- John 14:1-14

Say the word “father”, and you’re bound to get any number of reactions. Some of you will have warm recollections of clambering up on your Daddy’s lap to give him a big kiss. Some of you will remember your dad imparting dad-like wisdom to you like “tie a string around your finger as a reminder of that thing you need to do.” Yet for some of you, saying “father” means calling up memories of disinterest and distance. Or else “father” was a harsh and bitter man who held you to impossible standards. It’s very likely that when I say “Father”, the image you have in your head is a combination of good and bad; a man who maybe tried his best to be what you needed but often ended up falling short. In other words, the picture you likely have in your mind of your father is of an imperfect person, just like you.

Whether or not your dad was a Christian, the Bible wouldn't have been a great deal of help for his parenting skills. It always strikes me as hilarious when people say they wish fathers would take cues from the Bible more often. Which biblical fathers should we take as role models first? Lot who got drunk and impregnated his own daughters? Abraham who never met a handmaid he didn't like? Eli the high priest whose sons extorted and terrorized the people? Truth is, most fathers in the Biblical narrative are as broken and sinful as the ones we have.

In a world where both the first care and first wounds we receive are always at the hands of our parents, there is no word more charged with conflicting emotion than the word "Father." Our disgust with how all fathers fail points to an intuitive understanding we all carry of how a father *should* be. As if sensing that this relationship is one that desperately needs repair, Jesus seems to deliberately press on our idea of God when he invites us to think of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as "Father".

Of all descriptions, "Father."

"In my Father's house there are many rooms," Jesus tells his disciples on the eve of Passover. (Wow, bragging about who's dad has a bigger house, are we?) Then he says, *"I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one can come to the Father except through me."* Out of all the verses evangelical Christians like to cite, there aren't many that we love to pull out of our official Navigators verse packs than these two. The traditional focus of this passage has been on what kinds of rooms are in the Father's house or launching an apologetic discourse by pointing out that Jesus must have been crazy to say that he's the only way and that more, he's the truth and life as well. However, what we often miss here is the person whom Jesus points to: the Father.

Jesus doesn't say "*In God's house there are many rooms.*" He doesn't say "*No one can come to God except through me.*" He says "Father", and he means it. In fact, it's so important to Jesus that we recognize that he's the way to the Father that the "I am" he speaks in verse 6 is one of his "*ego eimi*" statements that Jesus often uses to mark off things we ought to pay particular attention to. "*I am*", Jesus says—"*I, myself. Me, myself and I.*" Yet he's careful not to let it stop there—"*no one can come to the Father but through me.*" The end result of going through Jesus, of adopting him as the true way to life, is to bring us to the Father.

We need to ask why it's so important to Jesus that he opens the way to the Father for us.¹ Why does he say "come to the Father" when he could just say "come to God"? Doesn't Jesus know that most of us have bad images of what a father is like? He might as well have said "*come to dinner—we'll be having earthworms instead of spaghetti.*"

The reason why Jesus keeps pointing to the Father is that we need to constantly be reminded that following Jesus isn't about ticking off a checklist of beliefs. Rather, when we first mumble the words "I think I want to be Christian", we are actually saying "I think I want to be related with the living God." None of us really know what we're saying when we say this, just like none of us really know what we're saying when we say things like "God himself is our reward" and the ever-popular "I love God." When we say "I want to know who this God is", we don't get a ton of theological textbooks handed down to us that tell you exactly who God is as if he's some pickled frog we dissect in grade 11 Biology. No, we first get an invitation to call on God as Father, as though we're his children. And, like children do, we keep growing in our relationship. Sometimes we get along great and understand everything that comes from him.

¹ An important article about Jesus' address of God as "Father" and not "Daddy" is J.Barr, 'Abba isn't Daddy,' *Journal of Theological Studies* 39 (1988), pp. 28-47

Other times, we dig our heels in and fight. But as we persist in our sonship and daughterhood, we come to know God even as he shows us more and more of himself. And at the very bottom of all of our desires is to be loved and significant; to be a child as though we're the only child. Responding to Jesus' call to become sons and daughters is the first step to knowing God for who he really is: a Father.

"Show us the Father," Philip says. I sort of imagine Philip saying this with a sort of earnestness that, in spite of the suffering Jesus was about to go through, probably made him smile. *"Show us the Father, and that will be enough."*

"If you've seen me, you've seen the Father," Jesus replies. After two thousand years of sustained reflection, we understand now that Jesus isn't saying he has his Father's eyes and nose. He's saying that the stuff he's been doing all along is indicative of who the Father is. The works show God's character. This is why Jesus tells them to *"believe the evidence of the works"* themselves. *"If you don't believe that the Father and I are one, look at all I've done. Does this look like the Father of Israel to you?"*

That's how everyone was used to relating to God, of course. Although God did on occasion allow himself to be described as "Father" in the First Testament, it was never on a one-to-one basis. He was father for all of Israel, for all of the chosen children of Abraham. That Jesus would call him "Father" as though referring to him as his own personal dad stunned the crowds who heard him.² No sane person would claim God as his Father because God was Father over all—and what's more, was properly called on as "Lord" and maybe "Almighty God." But Jesus does exactly this, and by claiming God as his own personal father, Jesus lays claim

² John 8:48-58

to knowing God in a way that no one else before him ever did. You could even say that Jesus claimed to know God so well that he might as well have been one with him—one in mind and spirit and heart and action—which is exactly what Jesus claims.

We could stop here and admire the view, but Jesus points through himself to the Father beyond. Though we who place our trust in Jesus call ourselves Christians (as if to say “show us the Son and that will be enough”), we’ve sold ourselves short by not realizing that Jesus is not just revealing himself, but is also revealing the Father.

You might wonder whether such a small meditation is worthy of an entire Sunday sermon, but there *is* a rough gem here waiting to be polished. When God makes himself known as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and when the Son and Spirit both bring us to the Father, what is it that God is saying about himself? Is it that he’s distant and uncaring? Is it that he demands worship and sacrifice? Is it that he has high expectations of us and will withhold a month of desserts unless we get straight A’s? Why does God make sure that if we know anything about him, it is that he’s our Father?

God sticks himself in our hearts as Father because at the very core of his identity is his desire for loving relationship, the kind never really thought possible by anyone before. If Jesus were only pointing at “The Master of the Universe” or “The Almighty Lord”, only masochists who love digging their faces into the dirt as they grovel would come out. If Jesus had said “I’m preparing a huge lamp—just rub it and I’ll do what you say”, God would be reduced to being our slave. But when he calls himself “Father”, God makes known that he *is* Relationship in action, and that he will pursue us around the barnyard like a mother hen gathering her chicks under her wings.

If relationship is what God is telling us he's all about, what does this mean for we who are discovering what it means to live in him? It means that as we slowly but surely are having our disparate pieces gathered together in Christ, we too will become people who relate not only with God as Father, but with each other as brothers and sisters. As if we didn't have enough on our plate—but now we have to deal with fallible human beings as our family? Why can't it just be "*me 'n' Jesus?*"

It's only natural that a lot of us have suspicions about the Church as a whole, especially if we start thinking of it as God's chosen family. Yet if God chooses to reveal himself as a good Father, how else can we think of those who want to draw near to him? As cousins twice-removed? As weird uncles we're only related to by marriage? We don't have much choice in the matter. If we commit to a relationship with God, we are adopted into a family that almost none of us would choose for ourselves because it not only consists of the worst kind of self-admitted losers and sinners, but even worse, self-righteous prigs who hold themselves above family.

Some of us protest that churches, like families, are dangerous places where there is abuse and pain. Sadly, this is true. Anytime you gather a bunch of sinful people together, you're going to get it wrong on occasion. But whenever I find myself blessing those who choose to leave our community, I go against my conviction that no matter how dangerous or how hard our experiences in the Church have been, we cannot change the fact that because we all claim the God of Jesus Christ as our Father, we are still family. Even though "family" is as loaded a word as "Father" is, our past experiences in our families and churches can't be the controlling narrative that informs our identity as sons and daughters and brothers and sisters. If our wounds and painful histories are the reasons we hold ourselves apart from becoming

real, active members of God's family, we are not just saying that we can't do it, we're also saying that God can't do it. Being afraid is one thing, but being cynical is another, and much less forgivable. If we fall into cynicism about God's family, we say that the Father's idea of what a family should be all along—loving, affirming, mutually supportive, warm and inviting—is a false one. Yet it is the narratives we grew up with that are the false ones. It is the story of brokenness played out again and again in our lives and in the lives of our families that is the wrong one. By revealing himself not just as God, but as Father, God is *not* redeeming the family concept. He's not saving "family." He's showing us what has been there all this time, the real reality that has been covered up by curtains of distrust and misunderstanding.

This is I think why the new command Jesus gives us is to love each other.³ If we love each other, this, more than anything else, is what will mark us off as knowing the Father through the Son. Not our dazzling arguments, not our concern for social justice, not our knowledge of the Bible—but love alone. And the practice of love is to join God's family.

1.) What are the implications for the Church if we have God as our Father?

³ John 13:34