

“God — A Parent & Apparent” — based on Romans 8:12-17 & Luke 15:1-2,11-32
Preached by Rev. Jonathan New
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Happy Father’s Day to all those fathers out there! It’s a good day. But, honestly, I have to confess that It’s far easier for me to preach on Mother’s Day than Father’s Day. See, Moms have so much their children really need and want. Dads are more problematic. A little girl, hearing of some students suspended from school, asked her father what this meant. He replied, “Suspension means you have to do your schoolwork at home standing up.” “Why standing up?” she asked. “Because,” the father explained, “a certain portion of your body’s too sore to sit on!” Now would this joke work nearly as well with a mother giving the definition? No. Fatherhood’s about sayings such as, “Just wait ‘til your father gets home!” How many times have we heard, “Just wait ‘til your father gets home!” if not from our own mothers then from countless TV and film mothers?

Well, the Bible’s also full of the punishing, threatening, law-giving Father. Writer Ian Frazier draws on this correspondence of traits applied to human fathers and their divine counterpart found in *Lamentations* for his “Lamentations of the Father” — a father’s laws concerning eating:

“If you are seated in your highchair, or in a chair such as a greater person might use, keep you legs and feet below you, as it were. Neither raise up your knees, nor place your feet upon the table, for that is an abomination unto me. Yea, even when you have an interesting bandage to show, your feet upon the table is an abomination, and worthy of rebuke.

When you have drunk, let the empty cup remain upon the table, and do not bite it upon its edge and by your teeth hold it to your face in order to make noises in it sounding like a duck: for you shall be sent away.

When you chew your food, keep your mouth closed until you have swallowed, and do not open it to show your brother or your sister what is within; I say to you, do not so, even if your brother or sister hath done the same to you. Eat food only; do not eat that which is not food; neither seize the table between your jaws, nor use the raiment of the table to wipe your lips. I say again to you, do not touch it, but leave it as it is.

And though your carrot does indeed resemble a marker, draw not with it upon the table, even in pretend, for we do not do that, that is why. And though broccoli is very like small trees, do not stand it upright to make a forest, because we do not do that, that is why. Sit just as I have told you; do not lean to one side or the other nor slide down until you are nearly slid away. Heed me; for if you sit like that your hair will go into the syrup. And now behold, even as I have said, it has come to pass.

For we judge between the plate that is unclean and the plate that is clean, saying first, if the plate is clean, then you shall have dessert. But of the unclean plate, the laws are these: If you have eaten most of your meat, and two bites of your peas with each bite consisting of not less than three peas each, or in total six peas, eaten where I can see, and you have also eaten enough of your potatoes to fill two forks, both forkfuls eaten where I can see, then you shall have dessert.

But if you eat a lesser number of peas, and yet you eat the potatoes, still you shall not have dessert; and if you eat the peas, yet leave the potatoes uneaten, you shall not have dessert, no, not even a small portion thereof. And if you try to deceive by moving the potatoes or the peas around with a fork, that it may appear you've eaten what you have not, you will fall into iniquity. And I will know, and you shall have no dessert."

With such images of how human fathers relate to their children, it's a wonder the notion of God the Father has survived. Understandably, these days, some who were hurt by their fathers or who are fed up with a male-centered culture, find the notion of God the Father so repugnant they are unable to relate to this God at all. Yet Frederick Buechner has said, "It has become so commonplace to speak of God as 'our Father' that we forget what an extraordinary metaphor it once was." I'm left wondering how it might be possible for us to again understand the uniqueness of this image of God?

To begin, let's look at a mystery of our faith — the Trinity. There are plenty of reasons why some of us may have trouble with this doctrine: They may reject the idea that God is a Father out of hand. They may have difficulty accepting Jesus' divinity. Or they can't abide the idea that God is active in our world — potentially subverting the laws of nature — as Spirit. Yet, for all its shortcomings, I'm not ready to throw out the Trinity; mainly, because it's useful. It speaks to the many ways we know God, acknowledging God's multi-faceted nature. God isn't only the distant father; God is the Son who walks with us and the Spirit who empowers us. It expresses how God is both transcendent and immanent, different from us and like us. It cautions us that we can't restrict our understanding of just who this God is.

Jesus' explanation of the image of God the Father in the parable of the Prodigal Son has no trace of the transcendent God. His father image is unique: The one who's supposed to be distant puts aside judgement and condemnation — even if deserved — to rejoice in his child's return.

I'm reminded of my father coming to get me on a cold December day in 1985, my sophomore year at college. Anxiety about my coursework had been building throughout the fall semester until my fears overcame me. Just before exams, I had to get away and, once away, I was too knotted up to return and complete my work. I felt weak and ashamed and alone. Yet my father chose to exercise his powers in a way that helped make me whole. When I phoned home, he listened and he simply asked, "Do you want me to come bring you home?" At that moment I understood the meaning of unconditional love. And I experienced it over the next few days as he dropped everything, made the twelve-hour drive to Ohio, dealt with flustered administrators, packed my things in the car, and when he didn't question or judge me during that long ride home. That set the stage for the healing that would later allow me to return to school and successfully complete my work.

For Jesus, God was a lawgiver. Yet God is primarily the gracious parent, and we are blessed, loved, valued children. The mystery of our faith is that the one so utterly different from us loves us completely. Human fathers and mothers can seem all-powerful and all-knowing beings distant from us. But Jesus reminds us that, while that may also be true of our heavenly parent, we may yet experience God's gracious love, and that, above all things, God yearns for and awaits our return.

Paul says, “All who are led by the Spirit are children of God. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God.” The Aramaic word, “Abba,” is the child’s intimate address to its father — that is “Daddy”. The uniqueness of the Father God image isn’t that it captures who God is exactly. To cry, “Abba!” isn’t to state that God really is a father. It means to claim dependence on and relationship to God, to acknowledge that God isn’t cold and aloof but stands near at hand, offering forgiveness and unconditional love.

Children have always wondered what to give Dad on Father's Day, and time after time they've settled on tools or ties. Why not? After all, as loving fathers these men have given us a tool for picturing God and a way of binding us to God. Today, we honor fathers for all they've given us, despite their shortcomings. But let us also praise them for the times when they chose the way of compassion, affection, and acceptance, and in so doing gave us a glimpse of Divine grace.