

Re-Imagining God the Father

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It is Father's Day at SPC, and it is good and right for us to honor them. It is the fifth commandment, after all. So here goes: SPC fathers, you are truly amazing! As I have come to know so many of you fathers in the past eight months, I have been humbled by the grace and dignity and sheer determination of your parenting. You have shown us a brief glimpse of what it means for God to love all of the rest of us in the way you love your children.

We notice your commitment more than you think. And we are grateful.

Because it is Father's Day, it is also good and right to follow the lead of Jesus in honoring God the Father, addressing God in the same deeply personal and intimate parental terms that he did: "Abba," Jesus called God. "Daddy." The one who forms us as his very own children, his very own family, from birth to death, to life beyond death.

It is one of the most beautiful ways to describe who God is for us.

Before I go any further, though, I have to acknowledge that many of us have been anxious to move beyond a strict patriarchal understanding of God, arguing that God is, ultimately, beyond gender definition of any kind. The root of this anxiety becomes all too clear when you actually ask people what it means for them to imagine God as "Father." I did that in the early years of my ministry. When you think of God the Father, what comes to mind?

The very first response went something like this: "Well, God the Father means God is the boss man, the judge, the one who is always doling out punishment. It's like that Far Side cartoon with God standing over the world in a long white robe, sporting a long white beard, stretching out a long white finger toward a bright red button, with a rabidly gleeful look on his face. On that bright red button are big bold letters: 'SMITE.'"

Let's face it. Father God has gotten a pretty bad rap over the centuries since that became our primary way of imagining God. For far too many of us, God the Father has become rigid. Domineering. Judging. Even downright abusive.

It is not just that God has garnered such a bad rap in God's relationship to humanity. God's relationship with God's own Son has been brought into question.

Feminist and other Liberation theologians have rightly challenged a doctrine of human salvation that depends on God the Father abandoning and then sacrificing his only Son in the name of some kind of cosmic divine justice. Is this *really* the God Jesus called, "Abba"? "Daddy"? Is *this* really the Father God we want to honor today? The smiting, judging, sacrificing, wrathful God we just can't ever seem to satisfy?

If we're really honest our biblical human father does not come off all that much better. "Father Abraham"—whom the apostle Paul assures us is our true ancestor into whose covenant with God the Father we have been adopted—and about which we should be thoroughly relieved—is not exactly the ideal 21st century model of paternal greatness, either.

What would we say today about a father who abandons his first so-called "illegitimate" son in favor of his second so-called "legitimate" one? What would we say about a father who then tries to kill this second son in

response to some strange voice he attributes to a strange god who demands this beloved son as some kind of divine sacrifice to prove his faithfulness?

We would say he is a bad father!

Hands down.

Call Child Protective Services. Find a foster home for his children. Garnish his wages for child support.

And we would be right. Any father who would sacrifice his own children—who would abandon his own children—who would *smite* his own children—even in the name of some so-called divine justice, simply is not worthy of the holy name we honor this Father's Day. Not even if that "Father" is God.

So what do we do? Do we give up Father Abraham altogether? Do we give up Father God altogether? Do we give up *God* altogether? Or, even worse, does God give up us, God's own children?

Absolutely not!

In fact, this is exactly the kind of negative image of fatherhood—divine and human—that Paul re-imagines in his first center letter to the Galatians.

It is Abraham's belief in God's *faithfulness* that makes him right with God, Paul says ... not his belief in God's judgment. Even when Abraham fails so miserably as a human father, Paul implies, Abraham trusts God to redeem his failure ... *and God does!*

Look at it this way: the cult of child sacrifice in atonement for sin is rampant throughout the culture of the Ancient Near East, the land through which Abraham is migrating all of his life. It is not uncommon for the tribes in Abraham's culture to believe they have to appease an angry, wrathful god by sacrificing a beloved child.

So if Abraham thinks he hears the voice of *our* Father God leading him to this awful crime it is, perhaps, because such a sacrifice fits right in with the prevailing theological understanding of how Abraham must atone for abandoning Ishmael. Father Abraham got it wrong with one child. And now he has to pay the price with another.

But God does not want Abraham to sacrifice his child in the name of divine justice! God has not ever wanted us to sacrifice God's children in the name of any kind of justice!!

We can almost hear God's voice thundering from the heavens today: *STOP SACRIFICING MY CHILDREN! Just STOP it! That is not ever what I wanted!*

God sends Abraham a ram, and Isaac is saved. And "Abraham believed God," Paul tells the Galatians, "and that act of belief was turned into a life that was right with God." Not because Abraham always got it right as a father. Not because he was willing to sacrifice his own child. But because Abraham trusted God's power to redeem his mistakes ... and trusted God to bless the entire world through his children. And God wants the same for us today.

"By faith in Christ you are in direct relationship with Abba God," Paul tells the Galatians. By faith in Christ we are in direct relationship with the Dad who wants to just wants to bless us. By faith in Christ we are in direct relationship with the Father who has always wanted to bless the world through us.

Just meditate on the name for a moment: Abba. Abba. It is almost a cradling sound, this pet name for father in so many of the languages of the word: abba, abu, baba, papa. It makes you want to curl up in God's generous, strong, patient lap ... it makes you want to be held by this loving, comforting, nurturing Father God for a very long time. Every one of us needs that kind of God, no matter how old we are, no matter if we are fathers or mothers ourselves, no matter if we are seeking forgiveness or just plain need a break. Every one of us at one point or another feels so completely over the edge that we just want to curl up in our Daddy's arms and be held for a very long time.

That is what the resurrection is all about.

God does *not* want to sacrifice his own Son as an act of divine justice. That's what *we* do! *God wants his Son to live!* And God wants us to live with him! And so on that Holy Saturday, that awful day after the cross, that awful day after such a misguided human child sacrifice through the evil of religious and political vengeance kills the very Son of God in our midst, Jesus finds himself back on the protective, compassionate, healing, hopeful lap of the Father God who gave him life in the first place ... and his Abba's angels cradle his precious, broken body ... and those angels literally put the Body of Christ back together again, so he can rise on Sunday morning.

That is who our Abba God is. That is the Abba God we honor on this Father's Day.

Our Father God is desperate to put the broken body of God's human family back together again with grace and hope and comfort and love. And we want to be part of that family.

Amen.