

Our Fathers, Who Art...

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I found the perfect Father's Day card for my Dad – on the cover is an adorable black Labrador Retriever (my father always has loved dogs, even though we never got to have one of our own); the lab is looking up toward the camera with that typical adoring, hopeful dog face; inside, the card says, "I've always looked up to you." It's true, of course, that I always have looked up to my father – held him in a certain kind of esteem that not even my mother could reach.

On Mother's Day we talked about "humanizing Mom" (Jane Rzepka's term) – about how the image of the sacrificial, super-human, über-servant mother, who lives and dies according to her children's needs and desires, does not adequately or appropriately honor the art and office of parenthood. How we ought, yes, to be grateful for our mothers – whether they be our biological ones or other nurturing figures in our lives – for their gifts to us, but that we ought not to put them on pedestals, from which they are at dire risk of crashing to the ground.

And the sentiment is true, too, on Father's Day... which I admit even as I succumb in my card-giving to the stereotype of the father who is somehow above me – representing an ideal which is apart, separate from me, which I hold in high esteem and may or may not actually have any desire to achieve for myself. Not an example worth following, you see, but someone to look up to... (It's like the Clinton Lee Scott reading in the back of our hymnal – that "always it is easier to pay homage to prophets than to heed the direction of their vision.")

And all this led me to think about the prevalence of Father as a name for God – present, at least, in the Jewish and Christian scripture, and prevalent especially in modern Christian traditions. And I got to wondering, in particular, what sort of pressure does it put on real, live fathers to share a name with God? And, really, what does the Father moniker say about God... or, really, about us who are the ones to actually give and use such a name?

The 20th-century psychoanalyst and author Erich Fromm argues that a Father God – such as the God of Abraham – "can be loved, or feared, as a father, sometimes his forgiveness, sometimes his anger being the dominant aspect. Inasmuch as God is the father, I am the child. ...

...[T]here must be a father who rescues me, who watches me, who punishes me, a father who likes me when I am obedient, who is flattered by my praise and angry because of my disobedience." (59) Whereas a mother's love is assumed, inherent, a father's love must be earned. A father – and in this case a fatherly God – "makes demands, establishes principles and laws, and [...] his love for the [child] depends on the obedience of the latter to these demands. [God] likes best the [child] who is most like him, who is most obedient and who is best fitted to become his successor, as the inheritor of his possessions." (55) In Fromm's paradigm, there is no intimacy, no affection, just a rule-maker and a rule-follower, the protector and the protected, the disciplinarian and the disciplined, the ancestor and the inheritor of possessions.

The writer Jack Miles explains the Father-God paradigm a little differently. In his book *God: A Biography*, he explains that the name Father for God first appears midway through the Hebrew scriptures in the book of II Samuel, revealing a shift in how God presents himself to his people (yes, God is male here...). God is said to have spoken to the prophet about David, “I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to Me. When he does wrong, I shall chastise him with the rod of men and the affliction of mortals; but I will never withdraw My favor from him...” (169) Like Erich Fromm, this father figure is still the disciplinarian, but this God clearly insists that his affection, his love for his child, will never be withdrawn. In this sense, “Fatherhood is an absolute, not a conditional, state. The father of a son cannot, in the nature of things, cease to be such. If the father disinherits the son, he is the father of a disinherited son. If he slays him, he is the father of a slain son. If he denies him, he is the father of a denied son. Even if he aborts him, he is the father of an aborted son...” (170)

There is here a *new* sense of irrevocability, of emotionality, of unconditionality (173) – a familial intimacy that was not previously a characteristic of the relationship between God and humankind. Rather than a mere uninterested creator and rule-maker, this God cares about God’s “children” who are no longer merely his creations. As Miles notes, “There is an enormous difference between the God of our fathers and God our Father. To this point in the narrative and, effectively, for a good while after it as well, God is the God of our fathers and *not* God our Father.” (170)

Another religion scholar, Huston Smith, reminds us that even much later, into the time of Jesus of Nazareth, it was a radical notion for God to be actively *concerned* about humanity (100-101). In Christian scriptures, Jesus models the parent-child relationship in calling God, “Abba,” a popular (though probably not accurate) translation of which is “Daddy”. And while the moniker Abba probably was more formal than “Daddy,” it was a respectful term of relative intimacy... and still a shift from the disconnected Godhead.

And religiously, of course, this fatherhood idea stuck. “Papa”, that loving appellation for fathers, was given to Peter, the first Bishop of Rome, and it has remained in the Roman Catholic tradition, where they call the leader “Pope” and priests “Fathers” (Smith 134).

Personally, for much of my adult life, I have been uncomfortable with the concept of God as a Father. I have seen too many examples of abusive parenting, of absent or disinterested fathers (and mothers, too). What sort of example do they set for us who are trying to understand The Great Divine Mystery in a meaningful and personal way? I agree with Erich Fromm – that if we limit ourselves to expecting fathers to be gods, and to thinking of God solely through the lens of human fatherhood, then we are limited in our religious experience, and in our human relationships. But, he says, “The truly religious person... eventually... does not speak about God—nor even mention [God’s] name. To love God, if [one] were going to use this word,

would mean, then, to long for the attainment of the full capacity to love, for the realization of that which ‘God’ stands for in oneself.” (59-60)

And yet... it is interesting to consider a different perspective. We know that we are frail, imperfect humans. That we will always fall short of the ideal, no matter how much effort we put forth. And yet *that* is the very reason why we need the ideal in the first place – as a point toward which we can look, as a model of right relationship, as an example of real justice, as a sign of hope that love is real and will be rewarded in this lifetime. And so, if I can think of fatherhood in those divine terms, and vice versa, then I just might have a chance at living up to those divine expectations – because I have seen them modeled, albeit imperfectly, in my father, my mother, my grandparents. I have seen them modeled in the stories of the Hebrew and Christian God, and of gods and goddesses in all the great traditions. And if only I strive toward that ideal, then I just might, someday, catch a glimpse of that which is holy, as lived out in my own life.

I believe we yearn for connection—with God, with parents, with one another. I am drawn to this Wendell Berry poem, “II,” from his collection *A Timbered Choir*:

When my father was an old man,
past eighty years, we sat together
on the porch in silence
in the dark. Finally he said,
“Well, I have had a wonderful life,”
adding after a long pause,
“and I have had nothing
to do with it!” We were silent
for a while again. And then I asked,
“Well, do you believe in the
‘informed decision’?” He thought
some more, and at last said
out of the darkness: “Naw!”
He was right, for when we choose
the way by which our only life
is lived, we choose and do not know
what we have chosen, for this
is the heart’s choice, not the mind’s;
to be true to the heart’s one choice
is the long labor of the mind.
He chose, imperfectly as we must,
the rule of love, and learned
through years of light what darkly
he had chosen: his life, his place,
our place, our lives. And now comes
one he chose, but will not see:
Emily Rose, born May 2, 1993.

Reading of Wendell Berry's father, I'm led to thoughts of my own. "when we choose / the way by which our only life / is lived, we choose and do not know / what we have chosen..."

I wonder how conscious my father was of how much I paid attention. I noticed *so much*. Here are just a few things I learned from my Dad. Not from his *words*, but from his *living*:

Real men *do* cry.

Needing time for myself just means I need some time to myself – I'll come back, and it'll be better for all of us.

The older the shirt, the more comfortable it is.

If it ain't broke, don't fix it. (It may say, "New-and-Improved," but it's usually only one or the other.)

Snakes are to be avoided at all times – even in the zoo. Unless one poses a threat to one's child.

Love is risky – with great affection comes the potential for great hurt. It's worth it.

Some of you may know my colleague, the Rev. Victoria Weinstein, who serves the UU church in Norwell, MA. She also writes a blog called PeaceBang, and last week posted a very brief story she titled simply, "Out Of the Mouths of Babes" (June 11, 2007) Last Sunday a mother in her church shared with Vicki the words of her 4-or-5-year-old kid. Apparently, Minnie had asked, "Is God that old man that loves me?"

Yes, Minnie, that's God – the one who loves you, who represents the divine love inside you, who loved you into existence. One whose character and image calls us toward the best in our human selves... who reminds us, that, despite our imperfections, our weaknesses, and yes, our downright stupidity, we are ourselves still capable of enormous triumph, of deep love, of great meaning. Yes, Minnie, *that's* God. And we know God because we see divinity in one another – not the least through the fathers in our lives... those who have been role models, nurturers, disciplinarians, teachers, mentors, hand-holders, cuddlers, coaches, housekeepers, engineers, carpenters, and cooks.

To all the fathers, in this room and in our hearts. Thank you, thank you for being real. For being humanly divine. For giving of yourselves to all of us. Yes, we look up to you, and we're grateful to have you by our sides. Happy Father's Day.

Amen.

Works Referenced

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