

“Hi, Scared! I’m Dad.”

I John 4:7-12, 18; Matthew 7:7-11 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might truly come to believe and trust that your love is infinite and unconditional. In Jesus’ name, we pray, Amen.

There are those who say that, at least at one recent point in history, the day with the highest church attendance, after Christmas Eve and Easter, was Mother’s Day. There are probably all sorts of not particularly heathy reasons for that. But today isn’t Mother’s Day. And I have no idea if anyone has even bothered to study church attendance on Father’s Day. Gender is complicated. Parenthood is complicated. Having parents is complicated. How all of that relates to our faith, as individuals and as communities, is complicated. But no one can deny that the church has a long, fraught history of daddy issues. And I think one could argue that those daddy issues are part of the reason church attendance, across the board, is lower than it used to be.

To be clear, there are many different images and names for God used throughout scripture. But there is no denying that Father-language is some of the most common, and certainly, the terminology used most often by Jesus, as the gospel writers recount it. Which is fine, except for all the ways it’s not. Because the truth is, we have had a very hard time, over the years and centuries, with keeping our understandings of God as Father separate from our ideas and experiences of human fathers. Our images of God matter. The way we think about God, the way we see God and imagine God and talk

about God influence us far more deeply than we usually realize. Those images and ideas impact how we think about ourselves, how we relate to others, how we wield or fear power, how we approach life, and so much more. And when all of that is bound up with our experiences of human fatherhood, things can get messy fast. You know that there are people who haven't set foot in a church in decades because their image of God is that 'angry, old man in the sky' caricature. But how many of us have parts of our souls that can't let that image go either? How many of us are still doing everything we can to please an imagined deity that we secretly fear is ultimately un-pleaseable? How many of us live with a baseline anxiety that that capital-S Someone is always watching and just one mis-step away from hurling lightning bolts in our direction? Even those of us who grew up with fathers who weren't mostly loud and angry, and who were formed in churches that didn't emphasize this understanding of God, are infected to some degree with this imagery.

So be clear on this: that angry, old man in the sky just looking for an excuse to punish us is not the God of our Lord Jesus Christ. When Jesus is talking about our "Father in heaven," or directly, in prayer, to "Abba, Daddy," that is not the God he is talking about or to. If we're going to be followers of Jesus, we need to listen more carefully to what he tells us about our Father in heaven. Because somehow, we've replaced most of what Jesus taught us with a simplistic caricature that serves not love and mercy, but tribalism, retribution and power. We have replaced Jesus' God of Light and Life with a god of fear and death.

“Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.” These verses have always tended to draw out the skeptic in me. “Yeah, sure,” I would think, “easy for you to say, Son of God!” Why does he say stuff like that, when so many people’s lives testify to the fact that this is not how things work? I may be just now catching up to what the rest of you have understood for ages here, but it finally dawned on me that Jesus isn’t saying this is how things work; he’s telling us how God works. He’s filling in more detail on our understanding of God, helping us see more clearly what God’s love looks like. God wants good things for us. God isn’t trying to set traps for us or trip us up, making faith hard to comprehend or something tricky to accomplish. God is generous and gracious and good. God, our Father in heaven, is warm and caring and forgiving, as we sang earlier.

What will it take for us to believe what Jesus is telling us about God? What will it take for love to conquer fear? How can we embrace this understanding of God so fully that we are able to share it broadly and widely and loudly, so that those who have not yet heard may hear? Because the church’s daddy issues, over the years, have caused a lot of damage.

Our images of God matter, not just because they impact our relationship with God, but because of their influence on how we treat one another. When we see God as wrathful and judgmental, we tend to judge others and see them fit for punishment. When we understand that God is all-compassionate and all-merciful, we bring Jesus’ prayer to life, forgiving our debtors as we have been forgiven. When we dive deep into

what Jesus teaches us about God, we come to see that the Father language he uses is about relationship and love, not about any of the gender stereotypes or limitations we attribute to masculinity. Once we realize that, we can come to understand that the ways in which we have used that Father language to create hierarchies amongst ourselves is not just a misuse, but a perversion of what Jesus was trying to teach us.

Fatherhood is not about power over; it's about responsibility for. If we're going to let Jesus teach us how to father one another, it means we're going to look out for one another; we're going to offer each other the best gifts we can that will lead to our common flourishing. If we're going to live in ways that reflect the image of Jesus' Abba God, we're going to celebrate the preciousness and uniqueness of every child of God we meet, which is to say, everyone.

If we're going to relate to God as Father, the Father God that Jesus taught us about, we're going to discover that we don't have to be anxious or afraid anymore. We don't have to constantly be looking over our shoulder, worried that we're going to get caught being human again. "Perfect love casts out fear." This is good news. This is news we need to share. For there are far too many people who have not heard. There are far too many people who have that angry, old man in the sky stuck in their heads – people who need to be released, by Love, into love, for love. Some of those people are us, but there are others who need us to learn and believe, so we can share and testify. God is love. God is love. God is love. Hallelujah and Amen.