

The Radical Love of God

Galatians 4: 1 – 7

There's a beautiful passage we find in the Gospel of Luke (chapter 11). Jesus was off somewhere (as he often was) praying. We can read between the lines and picture the disciples almost stumbling across him, out in a field somewhere, or up on a mountain – perhaps that 'lonely place' that we talked about a few weeks ago. And once again they see him fervently engaged in prayer, and they realize that this is the essence of his life, this is the source of his being - this amazing relationship that he has with God the Father – it is centered in prayer. They had never seen anyone pray in the way that Jesus prayed, and they wanted this for themselves.

And so, one of the disciples asks him: “Lord, John the baptizer taught his disciples how to pray... teach us to pray.” Show us how to pray as you pray. And Jesus, in response, revealed the face of God to them.

He said, “When you pray, say... *Our Father.*”

Now for us, this is a familiar passage. Almost so familiar so that it perhaps carries almost none of the impact for us that it must have had upon those who first heard these words.

These disciples had grown up with the frightening depictions of God who led the people out of the land of Egypt with plagues and power. The God of Israel who appeared to the people through the dense smoke of Mount Sinai, keeping all living things away from that mountain on pain of death.

These same disciples pictured God through the lofty visions of the prophets like Isaiah – remember his description of the dedication of Solomon's Temple? “In the year King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and lifted up and the train of his robe filled the Temple”. This was the God they 'thought about' as they went to prayer, the God before whom the Seraphim stand and cried out “*Holy, Holy, Holy*” day and night.

See, to the Israelites, God was high and exalted. And no Jew ever dared pray like Jesus did: “Our Father...” And lest we miss this point, we need to remember that while the New Testament was

The Radical Love of God

originally *written* in Greek, the language that Jesus (and all the disciples) actually *spoke* was Aramaic. Many scholars insist that *every time* that Jesus used the word *Father* in the Gospels (which is Greek is *pater*) he was, in fact saying it in the Aramaic way: *Abba*. The language of a child.

We see how this is entirely plausible when we remember the most intimate, the most gut wrenching time of prayer that Jesus ever had – we looked at this in the beginning of our Lenten series – Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. In Mark 14, we read this:

Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. “*Abba, Father,*” he said, “*everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.*”

It’s not likely that Jesus actually said, “Abba, Father”, (i.e., two different languages) but more likely that Mark is simply quoting Jesus’ exact address, and then translating it. So here is Jesus in this moment of anguish, under intense pressure, anticipating the nails and the weight of the sin of the world which is about to come upon him... and he looks to heaven... and says... “daddy... daddy... take this cup from me, if this is your will.” Because *abba = daddy*. A very intimate form of address.

Now, to address *God* in this manner would have been so shocking to these people who first heard it, that we can scarcely overstate its impact. In this one word, we get an entirely new image of God, a new paradigm, a new context in which not only to pray, but to live, and to think; a new context in which to consider our sins and failures, our plans, our hopes and dreams as human beings.

I’ve heard a recording a number of times (I listen to this on my iPod occasionally as I run) of Brennan Manning, former catholic priest, and author of a number of books, said something like this (I’m paraphrasing) in talking about the opening words of the Lord’s prayer.

“If you take all the goodness, kindness, patience, fidelity, wisdom, tenderness, strength, and love in all the parents who have ever lived, and put all those qualities into one single person, you would only reveal a faint shadow of the love and the mercy God the Father addresses to you and me in this moment.”

The Radical Love of God

In *this* moment. Right here today. Imagine Jesus walking up and down these aisles, and he looks directly at you – what’s he thinking? If your idea of that is anything other than “I really, really, love you” then you are missing out on the greatest thing that Jesus taught and shown us. Do you feel loved today?

The Apostle Paul picked up on this depiction of our new intimacy with God that Jesus opened up and you might say he ‘ran with it’. And there are a couple of passages he writes which give us deeper insight into what Jesus instituted in his prayers.

Such as Romans 8: 15 – 17

“... you received God’s [own] Spirit when he adopted you as his own children. Now we call him, “Abba, Father.” For his Spirit joins with our spirit to affirm that we are God’s children. And since we are his children, we are his heirs.”

We are God’s own *children!* Not by physical birth, but by adoption. And because of that, we have the right, the privilege to approach God, the one in whose presence Moses removed his shoes because he was standing on holy ground...the same God who flung the stars into place, who created a world so complex that the greatest minds ever have barely scratched the surface of understanding how things actually work; (at best we have theories that might be more accurately described as “mysteries”) – this awesome, transcendent, powerful, almighty God says to us that you can address me in the language of a child.

We can come to God with the same intimacy, with the same trust, as an 18 – month - old child sitting on his father’s lap...crying out, “Daddy”. Daddy. Because we *are* God’s children.

Do you believe this? You know what I’m asking? Not, “Do you believe that Jesus taught this”, or, “Is Pastor Steve giving us accurate information about these passages?” or anything like that? Do you believe that this door has been opened for you, so much so that it affects the way you pray? Or, so much so that it affects the way you think about yourself? Or the way you live – i.e., what the guiding force in your life is?

The Radical Love of God

Is your life centered in peace with God, the peace of a young child in the presence of his loving, strong, powerful father? So that, while you know the storms of life are blowing all about you, but you have this ‘peace that passes understanding’ that fills you?

As you think about *yourself*, what do you see? Especially in a spiritual context - Do you think of yourself and constantly remember all the errors, and mistakes, and places where you have fallen short, and messed up? Are you full of regrets? Do you, in turn, tend to be critical of others, ready to jump on their mistakes and shortcomings because you are, in truth, dissatisfied with yourself?

Do you live in fear? Fear of the future, of the past... fear that you are just not good enough, strong enough, wise enough... to make it in this hard world? Fear to consider yourself truly forgiven, accepted, and loved by God, without explanations or disclaimers, or exceptions?

Or, do you picture yourself as someone who is loved with the wild, untamable, endless, boundless – dare I say - *doting* love of a Father? One whose love will never end? Who will never change his mind about you? Who will never be so surprised or shocked, or disgusted by something you’ve done or thought that he will say, “You’ve run me out of patience...get away from me”...

(or, as Brennan Manning says) One who loves you as you are, and not as you ‘should be’ – (because none of us are as we ‘should be’ - not yet, anyway.) Is that how you see yourself? Is that how you see God in relation to you? Do you believe this?

I make little jokes sometimes to try to disarm people who find themselves in a panic after having been asked to pray publicly. [I was so proud when I heard that Ellen Maines picked up my ‘dropped ball’ on Wednesday. I told Gail Moyer that I would open up the Rummage Sale with a prayer for the workers, something I love to do, because this is truly a ministry, and these hard workers need God’s strength, patience, and protection. But I got tied up with something else, and didn’t get there until 6:10 – late! But Ellen went ahead and prayed. Someone said to me, “That’s probably the way you would have rather had it, anyway. And you know, they’re on to me! I didn’t miss that on purpose, but I think it’s wonderful when our lay people realize that you can

The Radical Love of God

do these ‘ministerial functions’ as well or often, *better* than the pastors can! And, in fact, that the strength of this church – i.e., that you *do* know that).

I do not judge people (at least, I really try not to), but I wonder at times why it is so difficult for some people to pray out loud. We have this feeling that our prayers need to be ‘perfect’. We need to say the ‘right things’, and it is a mortal sin to get yourself into a word bind in a prayer; you know, where you don’t know how to end a sentence? And you’re stuck?

You’ve heard me do that in my pastoral prayers... and the world hasn’t ended yet. I have to wonder how clearly we speak to God when we’re on our own, if we can’t find the courage to even say ‘thanks for this food’ in the company of our friends?

In that same lecture that I quoted from earlier, Manning shared something when talking about our own ‘prayer posture’ – about how we get hung up on formalities, and self-consciousness when we pray, because we think these things are important to God.

But Manning talks about “The casual intimacy of a child on his daddy’s lap, knowing that he doesn’t care if the child falls asleep or starts playing with his little friends, just the joy of that dad knowing that this child has chosen to be with him for that moment – that’s how God looks at prayer.” And he asks: “Is that the spirit of your inner life, coupled with that sense of reverence that Jesus also spoke about in the next line of his prayer: “May your name be holy”?”

I.e., Do you go to God in prayer thinking that God is actually pleased with your effort to be with him, because God so deeply desires to be with you that he came to earth in Jesus Christ to make that possible? Is that how you approach prayer?

If an orthodox Jew in Jesus’ day was heard speaking God’s name out loud, he was stoned to death. Once a year the high priest entered the holy place, bowed his face to the ground, and after much preparation and sacrifice, dared to whisper *once* the sacred name of Yahweh. And now Jesus goes from town to town teaching people that when you pray you should say: *Abba, daddy... may your name be held holy.*

The Radical Love of God

This absolutely changes the way we approach God; the way we consider him, picture him. It creates a whole new climate of relationship that now exists, one that Paul insists in Romans is not one of fear and trembling but a relationship that is built on loving, giving and caring.

So we read in John's first letter (1 John 3:1)

*See what great love the Father has lavished on us,
that we should be called children of God!
And that is what we are!*

So John here, writing as an old man, probably close to 90 years old, still marveling over this 'new thing' that Jesus has brought us. And he says, we're not merely *called* God's sons and daughters, but we are *in fact* God's sons and daughters. "That's what we *are*" he says. Can you hear him, "Can you believe this?" "I am a child of God?" That's what I am!

In the passage we read before I began this message we heard another place where Paul affirms this truth: (Galatians 4: 6- 7)

And because we **are** his children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, prompting us to call out, "Abba, Father." **Now** you are no longer a slave but God's own child. And since you are his child, God has made you his heir.

Now, when Paul references the difference between slaves and children, he is talking about the foundational change that came about from the old covenant to the new covenant. The Old Covenant was based around Law. Keep the law and things will go well. Keep the law and God will bless you and watch over you; break the Law and you die. Very simple

I just finished reading, in my daily devotional readings 1 and 2 Kings. Two books that largely (especially 2 Kings) chronicle the failure of Israel and its leaders to be obedient to the Law. And graphic consequences of their disobedience. This is the slavery that Paul was referring to. Slaves to the Law – a Law which we are incapable of keeping.

The Radical Love of God

And in fulfillment of God's promises (like that in Jeremiah 31), God brings about a new relationship with him in Christ. A relationship that changes our status from *slaves* to *children*. Slaves have to earn their daily keep. A slave is only as good as whatever they've done that day. The next day you get up, and start earning your place once again. It never ends.

And Paul says, "The slave days are over. We are now children of God, with all the rights of intimacy, access, and blessing that this implies.

Listen to those words from Jeremiah:

³¹ *"The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.*

³² *It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the LORD.*

³³ *"This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts.*

I will be their God, and they will be my people.

³⁴ *No longer will they teach their neighbors, or say to one another, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD.*

"For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

This was the covenant that was fulfilled in Christ Jesus. This was the promise of that new thing that Jesus began to talk about when, in response to a simple request from a disciple (Teach us to pray) he opened up a whole new understanding of how we can know God, and ourselves.

Abba.

Children of God.