

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word
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First Presbyterian Church
Clarksburg, WV

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Luke 11:1-4, 9-13

“When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. . .” (Luke 11:2 N.R.S.V.)

Our Heavenly Father

I am a child of God. I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and my Savior. And I believe he has the power to change my life.

There is a humorous bit of dialogue in the book, *Christ Is God's Middle Name*.

“Who’s God, Helen?”

“My father.”

“Your father?”

“Yes.”

“Why do you think your father is God, Helen?”

“Because.”

“Because what?”

“He’s in Heaven.”

“Your father is in Heaven?”

“Yes”

“I didn’t know, Helen. I’m sorry.”

“He was killed in the war. . .”

“And he went to Heaven and became God?”

“Yes.”

“Why are you so sure, Helen?”

“It says so in the prayer my brother and I say every night before we go to bed.”

“What prayer is that?”

“God’s prayer.”

“What does it say in the prayer about your father being God, Helen?”

“Our Father who art in Heaven.”

“The ‘Our Father’ in the prayer is your own father?”

“Of course.”

“And so he must be God?”

“Of course.”

Little Helen misunderstood when she thought that her deceased father was God. But she isn’t the only one who is confused about what Jesus meant when he said we are to pray to God as “Abba,” that is “Father or even Daddy.”

First of all, Jesus did not mean for us to focus on our earthly fathers to see what God is like. For some people who have been blessed with particularly loving and caring fathers, this might not be so bad. It might even be helpful, so long as we don't focus in too tightly. For no earthly father is perfect as God is perfect. But the big problem of trying to find out what God is like by looking at our earthly fathers is with those people who grew up with fathers who were never around, or fathers that terrorized them and abused them, or fathers that were cold, distant, and uncaring. Tell one of these people that God is like their father, and they want nothing to do with God.

Nor did Jesus mean to imply that God is male and thus that men and boys are better than women and girls. God does not have gender as we do. God is a spirit and as such cannot be described as either male or female. Further we read in the creation account in Genesis chapter one that both males and females are created in the image of God. Genesis 1:27 says, "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them." And in our lesson from Galatians we read, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:28)

Jesus had something else entirely in mind. First he gave us this way of addressing God as a reminder that our relationship with God is personal and intimate. I saw a picture once of John F. Kennedy, Jr as a small boy playing on the floor of the oval office while his father, the president of the United States worked at his desk. Powerful people from all over the world wanted to get in to see the president. They had to wait days, weeks, perhaps even months. But it is not surprising that this young boy was let in ahead of them. After all this was the president's son. It didn't matter that young John had no particular reason for being there other than he just wanted to spend time in his father's presence. He was welcome.

That is the kind of special relationship that we enjoy with God, only a thousand times more so. The president might have many times when he was too busy for his little boy, or where it might even be dangerous for the little boy to be around. But that is never the case with our Heavenly Father. No matter where we are or what time it is, we are always welcome in God's presence. Why? Because as Galatians 3:26 reminds us, "for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith." And in verse 29 we are called not only children of God, but heirs. We are princes and princesses of the kingdom. We can always go to prayer with confidence that the King will see us.

Jesus also invites us to address God as "Father" because God shows the perfect example of what the love of a great parent is like. Just as good earthly parents give their children rules and directions to keep them safe and to guide them in the right direction. So also God gives us rules and directions. We don't earn the right to be in God's presence by keeping the rules, the rules are to keep us safe. When we break them we suffer disorder and confusion in our lives.

But God as the perfect parent, always welcomes us back into his presence. No matter what we have done or not done. If we ask God to take us back, he opens his arms to welcome us home.

Compare that with a story of an earthly father and son that I read about awhile back. This 16 year-old boy had a fight with his father. And he decided to run away from home. As is often the case after about a month on his own, he decided to go back home. When he got to his house, he found a note on the door. The note said, "Son, we have moved. Have a nice life." The note was signed, "Your father."

That's harsh! In comparison Jesus told a story about a son who ran away from home and treated his father shamefully. But when the son came to his senses, and decided to come back and beg forgiveness, the father ran to welcome him back with open arms. That, said Jesus, is what God is like. No matter where we find ourselves, or what we have done in the past. God is ready to welcome us back. His love for us is that strong.

Now since this is Father's Day, I want to focus in a bit on how we fathers can benefit by following God's example. As I said before this is not really about maleness, most of what I say could be applied equally to mothers as well. But it's father's day, so let me talk to those of you who are fathers or who may one day be fathers.

I have already talked about the example of love that God gives us. But we men sometimes have a harder time knowing how to express that love for our children. So I want to give you one sure fire way to show your love for your children. Keep your promises.

God as our Heavenly Father is the original keeper of promises. The Bible is a record of the promises that God made and kept with his children. God promised Abraham and Sarah that they would have a child in their old age. And even though both of them were well past child bearing years, God gave them a son, named Isaac. God promised Abraham that his descendants would be so many that they would form a great nation. And it was so, in time the nation of Israel was born.

God promised to Abraham that his descendants would inherit the land on which he stood. That also took awhile, first they had to endure slavery in Egypt, and years afterwards in the wilderness. But in God's time, and when they stopped rebelling against God, they were granted the promised land.

God promised David that though he was only a shepherd boy, he would be king over Israel. And it came to pass as promised. God promised the people in exile that he would bring them back. And he did. God promised the Jews under the oppression of the Romans that he would send a messiah, a savior. And he sent Jesus Christ.

Dads, our children need to be able to depend on us to keep our promises to them. It is through promises kept that our children learn such things as trust, self-control, and confidence. We may not be able to keep our promises perfectly, but with God's help we can keep most of them.

Notice that I did not say, "Don't make any promises." That won't help. It is true that if you don't make any promises you can't break them. But children need to see promises made and promises kept. It is one of the best ways you can express your love for them. They are important enough to you that you will be careful what you promise, and that you will keep your promises.

Be careful of the promises you make. This takes a little work. But it can be done.

I knew a young boy whose father and mother were separated. The boy lived most of the time with the mother. When the Dad did show up he was always promising wonderful things. He would promise expensive presents for the boy's birthday, then the birthday would come and not only would there be no present, the Dad would forget to even show up himself. This happened time and again. What kind of message do you think that father was sending his son?

But it isn't just about rewards that we need to be careful. We need to be the kind of parents who set firm boundaries for our children. I was at a football game several years ago when a young family came in with a boy of about three years old. The boy was crying. The Dad kept telling him that if he didn't quit crying, they would leave the game.

It is so much easier to see this stuff when somebody else does it. We are often blind to our own silliness. But this was so sad. First of all it is rather silly to punish a child for crying. What are they hurting. But beyond that it seemed obvious to me that it was the Dad who wanted to be at the game, not the little boy. And that no matter how much the boy cried, Dad was not going to leave the game. The father was making a careless promise of consequences that he had no intention of carrying out. I wondered if this father also complained that his children didn't listen to him. That he could talk until he was blue in the face and they would ignore him. Well, duh! He didn't mean what he said and they knew it.

Now look I'm not suggesting that you have to do what you say, no matter how stupid or dangerous the thing is that popped out of your mouth. What I am suggesting is that you think and plan carefully for what you will say. And if you blow it the first couple of times, don't worry. Believe me the situation will come up again, be ready for it the next time.

Yes, it does take a great deal of work and planning to come up with appropriate consequences for misbehavior. And there are times when carrying through with what you say is every bit as much a punishment for you as for them. But in the end both you and your children will be grateful that you are a person who speaks carefully and truthfully.

Remember too, Dads, that one of the best gifts that you can give to your children is to show love to their mother. This is easier of course if you are married. Then you can show that love by keeping the promises you made to her when you married her. But even if you are separated or divorced, you can still give your children a wonderful gift by showing respect and caring for their mother.

That last one is probably one of the hardest things anyone will ever ask you to do. So if you are a divorced or separated Dad, ask your friends to help you by pointing out when you have allowed your own hurt to spill over in ways that bring hurt to your children. And ask for God's help too, for with God's help all things are possible.

As our Heavenly Father, God is faithful in lovingly keeping his promises to us. As earthly fathers let us follow that example with our children.

Amen.