

Our Abba God

Edward Farrell, a priest from the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Detroit, went on a two-week vacation to visit relatives in Ireland. His one living uncle was about to celebrate his eightieth birthday.

On the momentous day, Ed and his uncle got up early to walk along the shores of Lake Killarney and stopped to watch the sunrise. They stood side by side for a full twenty minutes and then resumed walking. Ed glanced at his uncle and saw that his face had broken into a broad smile. Ed said, “Uncle Seamus, you look very happy.”

“I am, lad.”

Ed asked, “Want to tell me why?”

His uncle replied, “Yes, you see, my Abba is very fond of me.”¹

Abba is the Aramaic word for Father that Jesus uses to address God. “My Abba – my Father-God – is very fond of me.”

On this Father’s Day which is also Trinity Sunday, here we have the experience of what it means to be a Christian – to know in the most personal, intimate way that you are unconditionally loved by a God who in some mysterious sense is your Father.

The writers of the Old Testament certainly believed in the Fatherhood of God, but they saw it mainly in terms of a sovereign Creator to whom they owed their existence. In fact, God is only referred to as Father fourteen times in the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament – and then rather impersonally. God is Israel’s Father, not the father of individuals. Neither Abraham nor Moses nor the prophets ever addressed God as “Father.”

That’s why Jesus’ use of the word “Abba” to address God is so revolutionary. All his prayers addressed God as Father. In fact, he never used anything else. The four Gospels record him using Father more than sixty times in reference for God. No one in the history of Israel had ever prayed to God as Father like Jesus. No one!

But this amazing fact is only part of the story, because the word Jesus used for Father was not a formal word. Abba was a word that a child would use to address his or her own father. It has the connotation of intimacy, tenderness, and trust – like running into a parent’s arms without any hesitation or fear.

As I say, Abba was a common, everyday word, but it was never used for God – under any circumstances. You simply did not refer to God as your “Abba” – which meant something like “Daddy” – but probably would be better translated “Dearest Father.”

Today, the Church's emphasis on inclusive language has expanded how we refer to God, and that is a good thing. God is Mother, Creator, Provider, Sustainer, Holy One, and Gracious One...the list goes on. And yet, every time we recite the Apostles' or Nicene Creeds, and every time we say the Lord's Prayer, and every time the priest celebrates the Eucharist, we address God as Father. Although we can and should use other words to address the mystery of God, the term "Father" remains normative. After all, Jesus told us to pray, "Our Father, who art in heaven..." Jesus not only addressed God as Father, but he taught us to do the same.

When I studied philosophy in graduate school, I became fascinated with the God of the eighteenth-century Deists –the Creator of the universe but not personal, caring, or benevolent. This was the God of natural law who ordered the world and gave us the rules by which to live but did not care whether we obeyed them or not. This was a "live and let live" God – a God who showed no mercy and gave no grace because this God was not involved in our lives. So with the God of Deism we are on our own, left to our own devices, struggling as individuals to survive as best we can.

But when I rediscovered Christianity and encountered the loving, saving God of Jesus, I knew in my heart that God was not just Creator but Father – not in some authoritarian, heavy-handed, patriarchal way, but as the Abba who loved and cared about me more than I ever could love or care about myself.

I came to recognize that the implications for calling God "Father" are staggering. Having God as our Father means that he is a living, personal presence, and not an impersonal force. It means I can get to know him. It means I can talk to him and interact with him. It means I can relate to him on a personal and even intimate basis.

In the end, I came to realize, as Sinclair Ferguson put it, that unless God is our Father, we are all orphans. Without God as Father, there is no Son or Spirit – no Trinity. Christianity collapses, and all we are left with is a transcendent God, Almighty, Eternal, Creator but completely beyond our ability to relate to.

Referring to God as Father changes everything because the Son becomes our elder Brother. He comes through his Spirit, with his Father to live with us. The Holy Spirit dwells in our lives, making us a suitable dwelling place to receive the Father and the Son. By the Spirit we learn that we are not abandoned or unloved, but rather that we are loved by the Father, by the Son and lovingly cared for by the Holy Spirit. As the traditional doctrine of the Church puts it: we come to the Father, through Jesus the Son, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The realization that God the Father loves me, that the Son saved me and that the Spirit sustains me changed my life. It gave me greater joy to live confidently in the present and greater hope to face the future with faith and courage. I had the resilience to live through the ups and downs of life knowing that I am God's child having God as my Abba.

This, I submit, is what makes the New Testament new, and better than the Old. Everything that is distinctly Christian as opposed to merely Jewish is summed up in the knowledge of the Fatherhood of God. "Father" is the Christian name for God.

So what can the "Fatherhood of God" say to us today? St. Paul tells us in Galatians 4:6, "And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'" Romans 8:15-16 says much the same thing: "...but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God."

Do you see what Paul is saying here? When we call God our Father, we are acknowledging that we are God's children, part of God's family and called into God's fellowship.

Visualize in your mind that the wealthiest person in the world comes to you and says, "I have decided legally to adopt you." Then the person adds, "That means that someday everything I have will be yours." Imagine how your life would be changed! Now imagine that the Lord of the universe comes to you and says the same thing. But that isn't a dream; that has happened. Through Jesus you and I have been adopted into the family of God. The Spirit assures us that we are indeed members of God's family. We are God's children and God is our Father.

I tell you, there is not another religion in the world that brings us so close to God as Christianity. Think of the experience of being a Christian. It means that God loves you, that God will take care of you and guide you, forgive you, and take you home to live with God forever. This is a God who is with us always, in this life and the next.

When my daughter Allison was a teenager, we would often go out together on a Saturday afternoon for some father-daughter time. One day as I was driving the car and Allison was in the passenger seat, she said to me, "I want to drive a car." I turned to Allison and gently said, "You know why you can't drive, don't you?" Allison replied, "Yes, because I have Down syndrome."

When we got home that afternoon, Allison was in one of her funny moods and kept saying, "I am special. I am special." And I said, "Yes, Allison you are special. You are God's beloved child. God loves you and will always love you, and that makes you incredibly special."

Yes, dear people: Allison is special because she is God's child, and so are you. God loves us as our Dearest Father. It doesn't matter who you are or where you come from or what you look like, God loves you. You could not make God stop loving you even if you were to try. God loves you even when you slip up and mess up and feel like a failure. God loves you when it seems you can do nothing right. God loves you when you make the same mistakes over and-over-again. If there is ever a reason not to give up on life and not to lose hope, it is this: God loves you as your Dearest Father.

On this Father's Day, that's good news for all of us. God is our Abba who with the Son and Spirit creates, loves, and sustains us. Believe it; it's true. God loves you just as you are. God loves you in the morning sun and in the evening rain. God loves you without caution, regret, boundary, limit, or breaking point.

Yes, Uncle Seamus had it right: "My Abba is very fond of me."

The Rev. Dr. Gary Nicolosi

June 15, 2025

Text – Psalm 8; Rom. 8:15-16

Trinity Sunday / Father's Day

Advent Episcopal Church, Sun City West, AZ

1. Brennan Manning, *Abba's Child* (NavPress, 2002) 64.