

About 2 years ago, I became a father. My wife gave birth to our daughter, Aria, on June 30th, 2016. And so began a journey I knew that I could never be fully prepared for. I had received a lot of good advice from parents, and some eh... so-so advice from non-parents. But overall, I felt pretty ready (haha.) I knew I wouldn't be perfect, but the moment in which I truly felt like the worst parent ever came one evening when I was getting her ready for bed.

She was beginning to crawl and pull up on things, so I knew to be super wary when changing her on the changing table. Ya know, that's 3 feet off the ground. I'm changing yet another nasty poop diaper and go to throw the diaper in the Diaper Genie and it's full... awesome. So, I have to take my hand off Aria for like 3 SECONDS to shove that nasty diaper down in there real fast. You may have already guessed what happened. My firstborn child - the one we had prayed over and cherished so much - rolled and fell 3 feet, straight down, head first toward the hardwood floors that we had been so excited to have in this new house.

BUT my newly founded dad/ninja reflexes were starting to kick in and I managed to grab a leg and, by a miracle, not rip it off, which minimized the head to floor contact. And now, cue the freaking out, crying, and general hysterics... from me. Then my wife runs in, and the baby's crying, I'm shaking from the terror and shame that I just damaged my child for the rest of her life and my wife will never forgive me and the world is over and I'm going to go to jail for child endangerment and....Breathe. She was ok, I was ok, and, thankfully, no one was damaged for life.

So, it's becoming more and more clear to me as time goes on that I'm not going to be the perfect father. I'm going to mess up. I'm going to let her down. And I know that everyone here is or has had an imperfect father. This can be part of why it's hard to talk about God as our "father..." because we have all had a different experience with our earthly father. We inevitably base our interactions and view of God the Father on our relationship (or lack thereof,) with our fathers. Maybe you had a dad that never said, "I love you," but just expected you to know it. Maybe your dad left when you were young. Maybe you had an amazing dad. Maybe your dad died, and you always longed for more time to get to know him. Maybe you wish you'd never known your dad.

Every one of us brings a unique view of what a father is, should be, or what we wished he would be. Today I want to talk about how God is a better father than we think he is... that he is not there to criticize us, to abandon us, or to leave us hoping to gain his approval. He has done, and will do, everything he can to show how much he loves us, cherishes us, and, while it can sometimes hurt, help us to grow. I want to invite you to sing with us, to celebrate God the

Father. No matter what kind of dad we had, we're celebrating that God is a better father than we think.

Message

This is our final week of our Eastertide series, Monday Messiah. For the last couple of months, we've been asking what difference Jesus makes in our everyday lives. For the last three weeks, we've been zeroing in on the Trinity: what does it mean to say God is Father, Son and Spirit - in One God?

We spent Pentecost talking about the Holy Spirit, and last week talking about Jesus, God the Son. So we're concluding this week with God the Father. And we're going to be in John's Gospel for one final week. So turn with me to John 5.

[Scripture Slide] Whether you have been raised in the church or not, chances are that you've heard about God the Father and how wonderful He is and how He is the true Father of us all. But then, you also hear about how God is a just god and that he is going to pass judgement on us all. And then we also hear about how this God is a merciful god, and that's why he sent Jesus down to us. And what we find in the book of John is Jesus saying all of these things about His father. It can feel like the Bible's picture of God is maybe as convoluted and confusing as our own view of fathers.

But maybe what we need is some context. We need to understand what it meant to be a father in Jesus' time. To do that, we need to realize that the entire cultural and government structure of that time was so different from ours.

The society of the Jewish nation was based on patriarchy. Patriarchy is a society in which the oldest male of a family is the one in charge. The men hold most, if not all, of the power. Within the family, this means that when a son gets married, his wife then comes to live with him and his family in their house. And when the family gets big enough, they build more houses and it becomes a compound in which the father, or patriarch, is in charge of making sure that everyone is taken care of. That means ensuring that there's enough food, water, shelter, and clothing, and that they are safe from predators and enemies. When you have a group of these families in an area, that then forms a tribe. And not surprisingly, that means that the heads of those families make up the elders of the tribe that then preside over disputes, set laws, ensure safety, and, if needed, enact punishment. That was their initial form of government.

We're a democracy. We elect people to pass, enforce and adjudicate laws, to keep our society running. In a patriarchy, all of that is done by the eldest males of the families that made up a

tribe, clan or village. A Father was a president, senator, judge and dad all wrapped up in one role.

What's really important to note is that your whole identity as a person was wrapped up in who your father, or lineage, was. Like every system, patriarchy has cracks in it, and the people who fall through the cracks of patriarchy, the people that system left out, were widows and orphans. Without a patriarch to claim you, you were essentially a nobody in the culture. There was really no welfare system to care for them, it's as though you were invisible to the whole system. This is why the early church and the prophets hundreds of years before that, preached non-stop about taking care of the widows and orphans.

That's a big insight into God the Father: no matter what social system is in place, God wanted his people to focus in on the most vulnerable and overlooked in their society. God's the kind of father who doesn't want anyone left out.

Now, contrast that to today. We now live in a bureaucratic government system. This is where the government has dedicated systems in place to manage and take care of those in need, pass laws, protect its citizens, and provide food and shelter for those without. In our current system, the role of a father is limited to providing for only his immediate family, his wife, and kids. And many times, nowadays, it seems as though even that has become somewhat of an option. Plus, we elect officials to pass laws, hire people to enforce them and appoint judges to adjudicate them. So when we call God "the Father", it feels very different to us than it did to people in Jesus' day.

When Jesus was talking about God as the Father, they would understand it as God being the authority, the protector, the provider, the one whose job it was to make sure everyone in his house was taken care of.

Yet when we talk about the trinity, we talk about "three in one" - that God is one in essence, but three in person. We have God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit and they are unified in their heart and mind. But I still remember feeling as if God was so separate and distant from Jesus. Like Jesus was the rebellious son that just wanted to love everyone, and God was that old school stern father figure, waiting for people to meet up to his standards.

But this doesn't jive with what Jesus says, or the whole idea of the trinity. Jesus talks many times about he and the father being one. In John 5:19-21, he says this:

So Jesus explained, “I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself. He does only what he sees the Father doing. Whatever the Father does, the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son and shows him everything he is doing. In fact, the Father will show him how to do even greater works than healing this man. Then you will truly be astonished. For just as the Father gives life to those he raises from the dead, so the Son gives life to anyone he wants. -- John 5:19-21

And even more passionately, on the night before Jesus is executed, Jesus prays a prayer that reveals so much about his relationship with God, the Holy Spirit, and what is at the core of the trinity. In John 17, he is pouring out his heart to God about everything he wants for both his disciples, and us today. Let’s read starting in verse 20:

“I am praying not only for these disciples but also for all who will ever believe in me through their message. I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one—as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me.

“I have given them the glory you gave me, so they may be one as we are one. I am in them and you are in me. May they experience such perfect unity that the world will know that you sent me and that you love them as much as you love me. Father, I want these whom you have given me to be with me where I am. Then they can see all the glory you gave me because you loved me even before the world began! -- John 17:20-24

At the heart of the trinity is love. That love is what drove God to send Christ to restore the relationship with us. It’s why the Holy Spirit was imparted to us - to empower us in our faith and growth. God is not waiting for us to meet his expectations of us. He is actively and eagerly seeking to restore and build a relationship with us.

But if God wants everything to just be love and happiness, then what’s with all the judgement talk? Why are there verses upon verses about God being the righteous judge? Why doesn’t God just let everyone in? Here’s my favorite part of this whole thing. How we understand judges today is not how the Israelites would have understood it. Nowadays, when you get a ticket or commit a crime, you go before a judge who knows nothing of you, your life, or the circumstances that brought you to the point where you are standing in front of him. All he or she knows is that they have a set of laws and are to enact justice blindly, doling out a punishment to the crime accordingly.

Now imagine that instead of one judge, you had two or three judges, and they are made up of your father, and the dads of your closest friends. You now have people who have a long and

deep relationship with you, and in the end, are trying to enact a punishment that will help you learn and become better. This is the type of judge that those listening to Jesus would have been used to for generations. Not ones that are cold and distant, but ones with who they have a relationship... judges willing to give the benefit of the doubt, and judges concerned with restoring you to whole, flourishing relationships with your whole community above all else.

The judgement aspect of God the Father is not meant to be abstract and faceless, but relational and loving. We saw this a few weeks ago, when Jesus claimed to be the true vine. He says:

“I am the true grapevine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch of mine that doesn’t produce fruit, and he prunes the branches that do bear fruit so they will produce even more. You have already been pruned and purified by the message I have given you. -- John 15:1-3

This “pruning” that God does in our lives is not born out of malice or anger, but of a desire for us to grow beyond what we think we can do.

But we can often struggle to see God's judgment as loving, because so many of us had fathers or know fathers who DIDN'T have their kids' best interests in mind. I'm sure that there were both good, loving fathers, and selfish, cruel ones. And even for those that have had great dads, we know that no father is perfect. That there's always a thing or two that you wished your father had done differently. While we are certainly a product of the way our earthly fathers raised or didn't raise us, we can still find the example of what a father should be in God.

A father is kind. He does not condescend to his children and he sets the example of kindness through daily interactions with everyone.

A father is compassionate. He is slow to anger and quick to love.

A father is faithful. He is committed to his family and they know that his love and approval is not conditional.

A father is forgiving. He does not hold the failures and missteps of his children over them.

A father is a refuge. He is the safe place to rest, and invites even those not in his family into safety.

A father is just. He does not show favoritism, but sees the value in each one of his children's strengths and weaknesses.

But above all, a father is loving. His love for his family goes beyond his needs, and sees that they experience love in different ways than he does.

Now, from what I can tell, not everyone in here is a father. So how does this apply to you if you're a mom, or struggling with how to be a good father, or maybe you're single, or still a teenager? I want to start by saying this: we have all had our lives shaped by our fathers, whether they were present or not. They have all messed up - every single one of them. Some majorly in a way that has affected us so deeply we may need a professional counselor to help us navigate and untangle the mess, while for others, it was in small ways that can be healed through a Godly partner or friend. But we can find a comfort in that our God - our true Father - has all the things we are missing. He loves us unconditionally. He will never abuse us. He will not shame us for our mistakes. He is not selfish with his time or love. He is not the father that has caused you pain. He is the father that wants to heal you, to restore you, to make you whole. And no matter if you have a child or not, you can imitate the aspects of your heavenly Father to those younger than you.

But what does knowing all of this matter? How can this change our lives? Well, that can really depend on who you are and where you are in life. For me, it started in college. I had gotten involved in this Christian study group called "Men's Fraternity." No - not that kind of fraternity. This was designed to help men of all ages look at their past, how they were raised, and how that affects: 1. Their relationship with their father, and 2. Their relationship with their son. Well, see - as I didn't have a son, I focused a lot on my relationship with my dad. Our assignment over Christmas break was to talk to our fathers about how they raised us, and things that we loved about it, as well as the times and ways that hurt us. You know - easy stuff!

I had had a pretty good relationship with my dad, so I decided to tell him how I wished he'd have told me he was proud of and loved me more. And that I'd felt that I'd always have to strive to be better to please him. You know - the whole, "Great job! But.. here's how you could be better." Well, to my surprise, he took it pretty well. And over the next few years, I saw a change in him that I never expected. He became fully invested in the Men's Fraternity program himself, and now he doesn't miss a chance to tell the whole world (usually via Facebook,) just how proud he is of his son and how much he loves me. And I'm like a kid again who gets so embarrassed because their parent is that overly loud one in the stands yelling, "That's my son! Isn't he awesome?" But really, I love it. I love knowing that my father wants to shower love on me in the same way our heavenly Father has done for him and all of us.

So what does it look like for you to be God the Father to your family and those around you?

Moms: These traits don't only apply to men. This is the example that God has set for all of us. We are called to be his example to our children. And some of you are having to be the father. You are doing the work of two. You can teach your kids about how God has shown you what a father does and is. And please, lean on us, your church family, to be your support. If we are failing in that aspect, then tell us. We as a church need to be better at supporting you.

New or struggling fathers (which really is all of us at some point): Ask God to show you what your family needs from you. Compare yourself to the aspects of God and see where you are struggling and strive to be better.

Single men and women: You have an amazing opportunity to be fatherly to the children in your neighborhood and lives... to those who long for an adult to show them attention and care.

Teenagers: There are so many kids just a year or two younger than you that look to you to know how to act. Be an example that helps them to grow up confident, and proud of who they have become.

And, for all of us: If we remain in God, opening up and trusting Him with the hurts we have, He will show us what a good father does. He will grow us in ways we never thought possible because we had expected Him to be just like our dads. He will make us into true embodiments of loving fathers.

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] We approach the communion table today as a space God has created for us. Jesus himself said that his death made a space for us in God's house. So we come to remember Jesus' death, to be united with him, to be made one with God.

At the meal Jesus shared with his followers the night before he was killed, he broke bread and gave it to us, saying, "This bread is my body, broken for you. Eat it all."

Later in the meal, he passed us a cup of wine, saying, "This wine is my blood, poured out for the forgiveness of sin. Drink it."

We come to God's table today to be made one with God. We see in God the Father the virtues we need to flourish as a people. And we receive from God the grace to embody those virtues in the world.

You don't have to be a member of Catalyst to receive communion with us today. If you're willing to pursue oneness with God, to let God be your Father and to imitate your Father in the world around you, you're welcome to come to the table with us this morning.

Prayer:

Before we approach the table this morning, I want to invite you into a time of reflective prayer. I want to put up a list of the qualities of a good Father, the virtues we see in God. I'm going to give you a couple of minutes of silence to reflect prayerfully on this list. Where do you see these virtues in your life? What do you need to ask God for the grace to embody more fully?

After some space for your reflective prayer, I'll pray for us and then, as you're ready, you're welcome to approach the communion table.

[All on one slide, 2:30 on the timer]

Kind: friendly, generous and considerate

Compassionate: Slow to anger

Faithful: committed and trustworthy

Forgiving: Doesn't hold wrongs against others

Refuge: a safe person

Just: Gives everyone what they need

Loving: Puts others above themselves

God, our Father,

You have gathered us here to be reminded what it means for us to confess you are our Father. We have come with all sorts of images of fatherhood - good, bad and ugly. We confess those images as idols that have kept us from knowing you as fully as you call us to know you.

We have heard in your Scriptures and from your Son, Jesus, what it means to call you Father. We ask that the virtues we have seen in you would become more manifest in our lives. Whether we are fathers and mothers in flesh or in spirit, we pray we would all look more like you.

We pray these wafers and juice become a spiritual food, that we would receive the grace we need to be your image in a world that needs to know the virtues of your fatherhood.

We offer these prayers and approach your table in the name of your son, Jesus.

Assignment + Blessing