

“Our Father who art in heaven” . . .

Y'know, there are actually some people who get offended by that! There are those who think calling God “Father” only celebrates a history of patriarchy and male-domination. Their brains start swimming with images of power struggles, puffed-up egos, and exploitation of the weak.

But does that sound like our God? Would that God call lowly Mary Magdalene to be “the apostle to the apostles” on Easter morning? (John 20:17-18) Would that God stand up to the Pharisees, who, in Jesus' words, were “devouring the houses of [poor] widows”? (Mark 12:40) Would that God come to the defense of a woman caught in adultery, and save her from being stoned? (John 8:1-11) So, what's there to be offended about?

Then there are others who get offended because they had a difficult childhood—maybe an abusive father, an alcoholic father, a deadbeat father . . . or maybe no father at all. And they think, if that's what fatherhood is, then they want no part in a God who calls Himself Father.

But again, does that sound like our God? Would that God number the hairs on your head, think of you as more valuable than many sparrows? Would that God promise to never leave you nor forsake you? Would that God stoop to die on a cross in the place of sinners, if that's what it takes to save you?

No, the vocation of father is one modeled after God—we don't model God after our own experiences. If a father fails to live up to God's example, then that's the father's fault not God's. God shows us what true fatherhood is like. So again, what's there to be offended about?

Still others get offended because the characteristics of God's very heart don't sound very masculine to them. *Compassionate . . . humble . . . kind . . . patient . . . selfless . . .* for many, these aren't manly adjectives. For them, this sounds more like a nurturing mother. You'd be surprised how many even in the church are using feminine pronouns today when it comes to God. Visit nearly any mainline denomination and you'll hear it from the pulpit—or at the very least, they wouldn't bat an eye if you spoke that way. When I visited Duke Divinity School, I can recall at least two sermons in my short week there that spoke of God as “her” and “she.” There's even one Episcopal church in New York city that's placed a female corpus on the crucifix in their sanctuary—they call it “Christa.”

But if we believe the lie that true masculinity is heartless and uncaring, selfish and ego-centric, brutish and harsh, then we ironically end up emasculating men. As a man, I take offense at this! On my way to manhood, I discovered that that's not at all what being a man is—no, instead that's how immature boys act. There are many grown up boys, it's true, but few men. What it really means to be a man is to put others first, to think of them and their needs, and to do whatever's necessary to take care of them. Sacrificing oneself for a greater good is what it means to man up! Think of soldiers, firefighters, police officers—men who put themselves in the line of danger to keep people safe—that's what being a man is! Even the faithful husband and dutiful father, who works hard to provide for his family and gives of his time to spend it with them, couldn't be more of a man! Now, does that sound like any God you know? Unmistakably, that describes our God as revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. So again, what's there to be offended about?

But, they'll argue, Jesus says, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem . . . How often I have longed to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings. . .” (Luke 13:34) *See, see!* they say, *Jesus uses a maternal simile for Himself.* And while, yes, He does make such an analogy, to say that Jesus is a mother makes as much sense as saying that He's also a chicken. It misses the point entirely.

Then, they'll say, *Well, in the biblical languages, Holy Spirit isn't masculine.* They'll point out how in Hebrew the word for spirit is feminine, and in Greek it is gender-neutral. But before anyone gets too excited—if just the word “spirit” itself is feminine in Hebrew, then that means any time you use the word spirit—whether referring to a man's spirit or a woman's spirit—it is feminine. Certainly if you were talking about my spirit, even though the word is feminine, you

wouldn't conclude that I must be feminine also, would you? Which means the Holy Spirit can still be described in male terms even though the noun itself isn't masculine. And while God doesn't actually have any anatomical parts that assign Him a specific gender—except for the physical male body of Jesus, of course—when it comes to the names God goes by, you can't miss how they're all exclusively masculine.

While there might be the very occasional comparison here and there of God to a hen gathering her brood, or a widow searching for a lost coin, we can't miss that God calls Himself King of king and Lord of lords—not Queen of queens—or Prince of peace, everlasting father—not Princess of peace, everlasting mother. No, it was all the other neighboring religions of the ancient near east that had not just gods but also goddesses, but the God of the Hebrews was always quick to distinguish Himself from the surrounding pantheons. So, I get a little nervous when I hear such careless theological discussions today. Y'know, the working definition of heresy is a truth taken too far—and while God does compare Himself to the feminine less than a handful of times, calling Him by names He's never actually told us to call Him sounds nothing short of idolatrous.

In fact, you and I already have a mother who art in heaven—did you know that? In Galatians 4:26, Paul says that the Jerusalem above—which has always been understood as the Church—is our mother. After all, it was in the Church that we were all given rebirth by Baptism, born again from above. And anyway, if God were your mother, and the Church His bride were your mother too, well . . . things can quickly get pretty complicated. So, let's let boys be boys, let's let God be God.

So, to tell you the truth, if anybody should be offended that God is called Father . . . it's *God!* I mean, if He's "Our Father," then that makes us *His* sons and daughters. And just imagine having us for children—now, that wouldn't be any picnic! C'mon, you know yourself, should God be pulling out the pictures in His wallet and bragging about you to anyone who'll listen? Or, imagine if your kids acted the way we rebel against God—how would you feel? Put like that, calling God Father isn't offensive, but just the idea that we're His children . . . now that ought to be offensive to God!

Poor God! You'd think He'd be offended to call us His own! So ashamed, He'd disown us even! But the disciples—guys like us, who we all know are also bound to be great disappointments—when they ask Jesus how to pray, this is what He tells them: "When you pray, say, 'Our estranged Father who art so separated in heaven.'" No, that's not what He says! You know how it goes—"Our Father who art in heaven . . ." Isn't it amazing that even after everything, He invites us—no, He *insists*—we still call Him Father!

And if God is our Father then that means we're family, and of course families belong together. So if our Father art in heaven, then that means we're meant to live in heaven too. So when God gives us this prayer, there's no getting offended—no there's just getting home. With a Father who art in heaven, we are reminded that all of us are on our way to be with Him.

Now I know it's kinda strange thinking of heaven—a place we've never been to—as home, yet our hearts are already there with God, aren't they? I remember when my family and I first moved here in 2013, we were renting an apartment in Vinings. It didn't take long before we purchased a house in Mableton, but we hadn't yet closed on it—that wouldn't be for a few more weeks. But the funny thing was, we didn't call the apartment where we were living "home"—that's what we were already calling the new house. It's funny because our mail was still coming to the apartment, we hadn't really packed any moving boxes yet, we hadn't even been inside the new house more than once, but already for us that was home. Isn't that like our heavenly home—we might not have crossed the threshold just yet, we couldn't describe even what it looks like, but still something inside us says that's where we belong. And life as we know it, is only temporary, like we're just renting some apartment in the meantime.

And I don't know about you, but for me, besides hearing "I love you," there are no sweeter words in the English language than "I'm coming home." Think of the soldier deployed overseas, or the husband swamped at the office, or—like me at the time—the college student on a flight home from Chicago, there's nothing like saying, "I'm coming home."

I was heading back for Christmas break, and after grabbing my luggage, I waited outside for my ride. I was watching my hot breath evaporate into the cold winter air, when a familiar car pulled up to the curb. Through the windshield I could

tell that it was my oldest brother as he now scrambled out to give me a hug and help me with my bags. It was a nice drive, just him and me, catching up and getting reacquainted. But finally, coming up to the house, was the best part of all. Even though it was late, my parents had still left the light on for me. Seeing the beacon of home was like an old friend reaching out, embracing me in the warmth of its glow. They must've seen us pull in, because there were Mom and Dad waving, eager to usher me inside. And there I'd stay—I'd come home.

The Lord's Prayer tells us that while we're not home yet, we're on our way. God is waiting there at the window—He's kept the light on for us. After all, He's sent out His Son to come pick us up. At least that's how Paul put it this morning—“When the fullness of time had come,” he says, “God sent forth His Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” Coming into our world, Jesus has pulled up to the curb of humanity, swung wide the passenger door, and has bid us all to hop in. By His death and resurrection, He who is the way, the truth, and the life, has made a way for us to get back home with Him. And carried in that grace, venturing forth in Christ, you and I now ride shotgun with our brother Jesus. And one day, we'll finally come home.

But when we get there, how do we know things can't change? What if, standing before God, all those bad memories of us as kids come flooding back to Him, and you suddenly become an offense to God all over again? Not to mention, you haven't really been formally introduced yet—what if you say the wrong thing and offend Him?

Well, if you ever owned a camcorder back in the day, you might better understand. If you had one before everyone else did, you might remember hearing people ask you for a copy. There you'd be, filming your own daughter's ballet recital, or recording your son's big game, when the parent next to you would say, “Hey, can I get a tape of that?” To which you might pretend not to hear. Or if you're feeling extra nice you might say, “Sure, of course.” But y'know, the tape they're going to get isn't the one they expect. You see, you're not recording their child—no, the star of your show is your own. There they'll be, front and center—anyone else's child, at best, will be out of focus on the periphery; you might hear their voice but it's only muffled under that of your own child's.

In Jesus, God kind of does something similar. The star of His show is always His one and only Son—Jesus is the lens by which God chooses to see the world. It's through Him that the Father sees us so that we really do appear as children—and likewise, it's through Christ that God appears as a Father to us. And so when it comes to dealing with you and me, He deliberately filters out our offenses and muffles our profanities, focusing entirely instead on His Son. God intentionally does that so there's no chance He could ever see us as anything less than His beloved children.

And when it comes to what to say, the same thing goes. Jesus gives us all His prayer—the Lord's Prayer. He lets us borrow His words, and in doing so, God hears the voice of His Son when we open our mouths. When we pray this prayer, it's like Jesus is standing with us—He smooths our stutters and smiles over our asking. That's really what happens whenever we pray in Jesus' name—He signs off on the prayer as if it were His own. In Christ, you and I can approach God confidently, knowing that He loves us like we were none other than His one and only Son!

So, right now, as you're on your ride home—pulling up to the driveway, the light left on for you, God watching eagerly out the front window—pray this prayer. Saying, “Our Father who art in heaven” is like a little child running down their street shouting, “I'm coming home!”