



Mark 14:32-36
 What's In A Name?
 Abba: Father

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 4th Advent Sunday

One of the first words in our culture that a baby learns to say is “dad” or “da” or “dada”. I remember when Blake, our oldest child, learned to say “Da”. It was before he learned “Ma” – and let’s be honest: that was what really mattered. 😊 I thought that was so cool, and my recollection is that I wasn’t shy about letting Gwen know that he’d learned to address me first. Of course, it often happens that way, as you probably know, because “d” is an easier sound for a baby to make than “m.” Regardless, when it happens, it makes every father proud, and maybe not in a good way – until the child starts calling “Da” for every need he or she has. Because then your wife is able to look at you and say, “Honey! Little Jane wants you to change her diaper/feed her/help her fall back asleep” and so forth. All of the sudden, it’s not such a great victory. So, for *me*, with all the rest of our kids, I sacrificed my pride and tried to get them to learn “ma” first.

Now...whether they learn “ma” or “da” first, it eventually progresses to “mother” and “father” once they can handle the complexity of those words. **All of these titles convey a relationship that is unique to the parents and their children.** No one else calls those grown-ups “mom” or “dad” other than their children (only my kids call me “dad” for instance), and no one else calls those kids their “son” or “daughter” than their mom or dad (only Gwen and I call our children our “sons” and “daughters”). You can test this out next time you’re standing in line at the grocery store and the person next to you has a child strapped into the grocery cart: address the child as your son or your daughter...or invite them to call you “mom” or “dad” and see what happens. Just don’t blame me when the real mom or dad lashes out at you and calls the cops on you. 😊

But, this is the kind of relationship we can have with God. God invites us into it, and desires this relationship with us. Jesus models this for us throughout his ministry, regularly addressing God as “Father”. But in today’s passage from Mark, Jesus uses a word that he uses only this one time, and it’s a word that only appears two other times in Scripture – later in Paul’s letters to the Romans and in Galatians. So, as we continue our series on some of the

Biblical names of God, let's read this passage from Mark, near the end of Jesus' life. It's a passage which serves as a poignant reminder of why his birth and his life matter so much. **(Mark 14:32-36).**

So, Jesus addresses God as "Abba, father." Now, maybe your only previous interaction with the word "Abba" is with the Swedish musical group of the same name. The band name is just an acronym using the first letter of the first name of each person in the band.

So "Abba," the word Jesus uses here, is not some kind of 2,000 year foreshadowing or prophetic word of a Swedish band with a hit song called "Dancing Queen." Rather, it's directed out our heavenly king, or more accurately, our heavenly father. **Abba is an Aramaic word that simply means, "Father."** Aramaic was a language related to Hebrew – in fact, the Hebrew word for "father" is "Ab." Aramaic was commonly spoken throughout Israel in Jesus' day. It was acquired by the Israelites during Babylonian captivity starting in about 588 B.C. Obviously, Hebrew was known by Israelites even in Jesus' day, but it really became the language of scholars and religion during this time; and then Greek was common as well because of the Roman Empire. So in Jesus' day, in Jerusalem and throughout Israel, all three languages were in use, with Jewish people being conversant in two of them for sure, and many knew Greek as well.

And so: "Abba" is Aramaic, and is left untranslated in the Greek New Testament and in our English Bibles as well; and then it is followed by "father" which is the Greek word "pater" (pah-tare). Similarly, "pater" is the common, regular Greek word for "father." It's what Jesus uses every time he speaks about God as father, or address his heavenly father. Now, in 1971 German Lutheran theologian Joachim Jeremias (Pronounced: Yo-a-cheem Yehr-a-meeas) wrote a New Testament theological book called... "New Testament Theology." I know, a really creative and thrilling title of a book, right? At least it's clear. In it, he stated that this word "Abba" was "the chatter of a small child... a children's word used in everyday talk" and that it was unthinkable to the people of Jesus' day "to address God with this familiar word." Because of what he wrote in 1971, people came to think of "Abba" as "daddy" or "papa", with the implication that it was a more

innocent, child-like way of addressing God. And many people have latched on to that over the last 50 years or so.

And God does encourage us to have a child-like faith. Jesus says so himself in Matthew 18:3, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” But “Abba” is not really a word that is child babble, like a child in America that might say “da” or “ma” before “graduating” to “father” or “mother.” In fact, there *isn't* another Aramaic word for “father” that’s more “grown-up.” Sorry if I just burst some theological bubbles for you, if you thought using “Abba” was like calling God “daddy.” This was new to me, also, and when I first came across it this week, I was surprised...and so I did a lot more research to verify. As one article I read this week puts it, “It is important and true to understand that God is our intimate Father. So many places in the New Testament make this vividly and encouragingly clear. It is one of the rich qualities that makes Christianity distinct from all other faiths and philosophies. But let’s not illustrate this grace for others [other people] with something that is not true.”¹ In other words, let’s not make “Abba” into something it’s not for the sake of conveying a theological point. We don’t need to do distort things, in order to convey the Biblical truth about having a child-like faith. We want to stand on solid ground when conveying Scriptural truths. So...it’s not a child’s word, as though there’s a “grown-up” word that is later used. It is *the* Aramaic word for father.

Now, there can be no debate that Jesus addresses God as his Father, or his Heavenly Father, and that he encourages us to do the same. Jesus regularly teaches this, addresses God this way, and encourages his followers to do the same, and so forth. And there’s no debate that it’s meant to convey a close, even tender, relationship. Early in John’s gospel, we get a picture of this relationship when he writes in John 1:18, **“No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.”** Literally, in Greek the words “closest relationship with the Father” are “in the bosom of the father.” That’s the close relationship that exists between God the Father and God the Son, Jesus. Much like asking a child in line at a grocery store to call you “dad” or “mom”: Ask someone you know well if you can sit at their side.

They will be happy and honored to have you do so. Ask them if you can “dwell at their bosom” and you’ll probably get a different reaction. The point is: The relationship between Jesus and his heavenly Father is close, and throughout his ministry he seeks to draw people into a similar relationship with their heavenly father.

So, Jesus’ message throughout the gospels is that we are invited to know God as our Heavenly Father as he does. You can know God – not just as Creator (Elohim), not just as Lord (Adonai and Kurios)...but also as your heavenly father. As one who loves you, protects you, and cares for you. For people who have/had a good relationship with their earthly father, that is a positive invitation...it’s one we can easily affirm. For people who have/had a difficult relationship with their earthly father, maybe even an abusive one, or maybe didn’t know their earthly father...having a good heavenly father might be a hard concept to grasp...it might be hard to believe that someone with the title of “father” could be someone you’d even want in your life. But that’s Jesus’ invitation: be in relationship with your heavenly father, who is a good father, who loves you and cares about you.

To help us understand our heavenly father’s love, Jesus tells a famous parable that is recorded for us in Luke 15. **It is often called the parable of the prodigal son, but it’s really about the love of the father.** The younger son treats his father with rudeness, asks for what isn’t his, turns his back on his father, squanders all that he has, and finally returns home when he literally has no other options. Then there’s the older son, who has remained and stayed faithful to his father. He’s played by all the rules. And yet when the younger son returns and the father welcomes him home and throws a party to celebrate the fact that he’s still alive and has returned, this older son throws a pity party and a tantrum.

In regards to both sons in the story, the father is full of grace, compassion, and love, and he wants a relationship with both of them. He wants them both to know how much he cares for them, because he is their father. This is how our heavenly father relates to us as well. **That’s the point of the parable: wherever you are on the spectrum of life and relationship to God, your heavenly father loves and cares for you deeply and desires to be in**

relationship with you. The question is: How do we have that relationship? How can we be in fellowship with our heavenly father?

Jesus himself gives us the answer. In John 3, a man named Nicodemus approaches Jesus at night to talk with him. Nicodemus was a successful guy, a respected Jewish leader, according to what John writes here. Rather than being like the younger brother in Jesus' parable who ran off and squandered everything, Nicodemus was more like the older brother who did everything "just right". He could fit right in here in Kirkland and the Eastside, where there's a lot of worldly "success" and people of position and power. But in spite of his successes and his position in society, he is looking for something more in life. And he wonders if Jesus might have the answers. So, he seeks out Jesus and pays him a compliment about his teaching and the presence of God with him. Jesus responds by saying, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the Kingdom of God unless they are born again."

In other words, in the metaphor of "father": It's one thing to be born and have an earthly father, but it's a whole different deal to know God as your heavenly father. And that happens when you are "born again." I know some people think that Evangelical Christians invented this phrase or at least co-opted it for their own purposes, but the fact is: Jesus is the one who says that being "born again" matters. And Jesus says here – and elsewhere, as well – that if you want to know your heavenly father, being "born again" is a prerequisite. It's not optional.

So what does it mean to be "born again?" Nicodemus asks that very question, and Jesus says, "You must be born of water and the Spirit." So it's a spiritual re-birth he's talking about. There's a little uncertainty about what Jesus meant when he said, "born of water" – though most take it to mean symbolic spiritual cleansing with water, such as baptism. What Jesus means by being born of the Spirit is fairly easy to ascertain with a reading of his teachings. **Being spiritually born – "born again" – means having a spiritual awakening to the truth of who Jesus is, and putting your faith and trust in Him.** You can't read the biographies of Jesus, what we call the Gospels, and come away with any other conclusion. You can be like Nicodemus – successful, having the respect of your peers...we don't know about his

family life, but you could be happily married, have a few kids and a dog...and yet have your heart completely disconnected from your heavenly father. In fact, in the parable of the father and the two sons, both sons really were distanced from their father – one expressed it by running away, the other expressed it in resentment when his brother returned. And Jesus invites us to this spiritual re-birth.

So being born again means getting connected to your heavenly Father. And like a birth, it's a new beginning, a new start. Also, just as a child only calls a certain man and a certain woman “dad” or “mom”...and a parent only calls certain kids his or her sons or daughters, so it is with our relationship with God. Only those who have been born again know God as their heavenly father. In other words: **God is our heavenly father once we are born again through faith in Jesus.** Those who are in relationship with the Son, are in relationship with the Father. When we do that, our heavenly Father welcomes us into his presence, just as in the parable of the prodigal son. God welcomes us home, welcomes us into His family.

And then we know him as our Heavenly Father. We can turn to him for the protection, care, and love that He offers. That's what a good father does. He protects, he cares, he loves. Jesus cries out to His Heavenly Father in prayer in this passage. “Abba, father” he says. He wants his father to do something for him to “take this cup from me.” But he knows that Father knows best. Sometimes dads swoop in and rescue their kids from challenges, but sometimes they don't. They let them stumble – like the son in the story who ran off after asking for his inheritance early. Why do dads (and moms do this, too, of course) let their kids do this sometimes? Because there's a bigger picture in view. There are lessons to learn that are better to learn at an early age when the consequences are less, than at a later age when the consequences might be a lot more significant.

Now, in Jesus' case, it's not about consequences, at least not in the sense of a lesson learned. Rather: **His Heavenly Father has a plan; he sees the bigger picture. And even though Jesus, in his flesh, is troubled by his date with the cross that looms ahead of him, he nonetheless trusts his heavenly Father: “yet not my will, but your will be done” (Mark 14:36).**

We see here the full and complete trust Jesus has in His heavenly Father, because His father is the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, he's got all of time in his hands. Jesus completely trusts His heavenly Father. And we are invited into that same place of trust when we are born again and know God as our Heavenly Father as well.

So: What's your relationship like with your Heavenly Father? Are you like the older brother: struggling with the relationship, but masking that struggle with success and outward appearances and doing everything "just right"? Are you like the younger brother: ignoring the relationship, turning your back on God and running from Him? Or maybe you've reached rock bottom and you're at a point where you have nowhere else to turn and you're looking for your heavenly father, on a journey back to Him? Perhaps you're curious and interested...maybe you have some questions...much like Nicodemus...maybe you're still needing to be born again. Jesus invites you here and now to follow him, and to know him, to be born again...and to be in relationship with your heavenly father.

Wherever you may be in regards to that relationship, Jesus invites you to trust him, and when we do, God welcomes you with open arms. He is your Abba...your father, who is in heaven. He invites you to be born into his family as one of his children and turn to him for eternal protection, care, and love. Let's pray...Amen.

¹ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/factchecker-does-abba-mean-daddy/>