

Cry Out, "Abba, Father!"

In the book of Ephesians chapter 6, the Lord gives this word of instruction: "Fathers, bring your children up in the training and instruction of the Lord." I'm afraid far too many Christian fathers abdicate this responsibility . . . leaving it up to the church or their wives to teach their children about Jesus. For some, admittedly, it is a lack of interest. But for others there's a feeling or fear that they don't know enough about the Lord and the Bible to properly instruct their children. There's a simple remedy for that, by the way . . . study the Bible. Get to know God better through his Word. Then you will feel more qualified.

But there's another way in which Christian fathers can – and likely more commonly do – bring their children up in the training and instruction of the Lord." And that is simply by being godly fathers. Being the kind of man, the kind of dad that models the character of you and your children's Heavenly Father.

As a father you have an awesome role to play for your children. Not only as a provider and protector as the head of your home. But as the living image of God to your children. The one who demonstrates for your children what the love of a father looks like, feels like, acts like. God has chosen to reveal himself to us as "Our Heavenly Father." But in order for his true nature and the relationship he wants to have with his children to be properly communicated to your children, you must be God's kind of father to your children. And admittedly, that's no small challenge.

It is my prayer this Father's Day that the words of Romans chapter 8 this morning equip and encourage you dads here today in your role as a God-fearing, God-pleasing father. My prayer also is that for you and for the rest of you here today, that God's words today lead you to appreciate and adore the relationship you have with your Father in heaven.

Our lesson begins by assuring us of our spiritual status, saying that: "those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God." And again, "The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children."

How can we be so sure that God considers us to be his children? God the Holy Spirit tells us so. "The Spirit testifies . . . that we are God's children." Where is the Spirit's testimony? In his Word. The Bible, where "men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21). Being a child of God is not a birthright. The Bible tells us that by nature – as we are born into this world – we are born sinful and are the enemies of God. As such we are objects of God's wrath and deserving of nothing but banishment to hell. And yet, God in his love for all of us sent his one and only Son into the world to save us. And while many people refuse to come to him to be saved, in John chapter 1 the Spirit testifies: "Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God – children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God" (John 1:12-13). Jesus explained how this came about for us when he was speaking with a man named Nicodemus. He is recorded as saying in John chapter 3: "I tell you the truth, unless a person is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. Flesh gives birth to flesh [sinful people give birth to sinful people], but the Spirit gives birth to spirit [the Holy Spirit gives birth to the spiritual nature inside of us]" (vss.5-6). And the Holy Spirit testifies to the same

thing in the book of Galatians: “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ” (3:26-27).

Being a child of God is not a birthright, but it is a rebirthright! Although we were born dead in transgressions and sins and therefore enemies of God, you and I have been born again of water and the Spirit. We have been adopted by God, who has declared us to be holy like him by washing away our sins in holy Baptism and crediting us with Jesus’ holiness. That’s what the Bible assures us! There “the Spirit testifies . . . that we are God’s children.”

Remember that – especially in times of suffering. In times of suffering people commonly are led to believe falsely that God no longer loves them, that God has abandoned them, that God no longer cares. And instead of running to him, they stay away. Either because they’re angry at God or because they are afraid that God is angry with them . . . and they certainly don’t want to anger him anymore. But listen to the words of our lesson: “The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, “*Abba*, Father.”

“God is love,” the Bible says. And “there is no fear in love, because fear has to do with punishment.” (I John 4) But because “there is now no longer any condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1), the Holy Spirit assures us “you [do not] live in fear again.” You are God’s sons and daughters, even in times of suffering and struggle and tragedy. Rather than running from him in such times, run to him and cry “‘*Abba*’, Father!”

Dads, do your children run to you when they are hurting – whether that pain is physical or emotional? I think moms have the reputation of being a bit more tender and sympathetic, so – given the choice – maybe they run to mom first. But is your relationship with your children such that they would feel comfortable calling out to you or coming to you when they were in a position of need? I hope they would. I hope they do. I pray that your children know you love them and have learned that – in spite of perhaps a tough, manly outer shell – that inside you are compassionate, kind, understanding, sympathetic and gentle.

God the Father is almighty! He is all-powerful! He can be and has been at times a very stern God. But the Spirit also testifies about him: “A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out” (Isaiah 42:3).

What did Jesus do in the Garden of Gethsemane? There Jesus was about to step beneath the wrath of God to take on the punishment and hell all humankind deserved for violating God’s holy law. He was about to face the justice of a holy God. And yet, even then, Jesus knew the heart of his heavenly Father. And so he turned to him in that dark hour and prayed: “*Abba*, Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will” (Mark 14:36). What a remarkable lesson for us! Even in the midst of our suffering – even suffering we may have invited on to ourselves, we may cry out to God and know he will listen as a loving, tender-hearted heavenly Father. And while God’s will may not exactly be ours, we can trust that the Lord hears and will answer in love for us. He will lift that pain and suffering, or – as he did for Jesus – he will give us the strength to patiently bear it and then see to it that it accomplishes its intended purpose in short order.

Nowhere does the Bible promise that we won’t have pain and suffering in this life. In fact, it says just the opposite . . . even in our lesson it says we will “share in [Jesus’] sufferings.”

But it also invites us to cry out to God and promises that he will hear and answer as a loving Father.

On the basis of this and other similar passages in the Bible, Martin Luther explained the meaning of the address of the Lord's Prayer in these words: "With these words God tenderly invites us to believe that he is our true Father and that we are his true children, so that we may pray to him as boldly and confidently as dear children ask their dear father." Not only in the times when things are going well and our relationship with God seems strong. But also – and especially – in the dark times, the times when we are being challenged and feeling weak in the faith, in times of suffering. "Call upon me in the day of trouble," the Lord invites us, "I will deliver you and you will honor me" (Psalm 50:15).

That's what children do in their relationship with loving fathers. That's what Jesus did in his relationship with his heavenly Father. And he tells us to do the same. Both in suffering and in glory.

The last verse of our lesson reads: "Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory."

Jesus' suffering was for a purpose . . . it was to make it possible for us to share in his glory. Jesus' death was necessary to pay for the wages of our sin – which is death. Jesus had to be forsaken by God so that we never will be. Jesus had to suffer hell so that we won't ever have to. The Bible says in the book of Hebrews chapter 2: "In bringing many sons and daughters to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect [or complete] through suffering. Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters" (2:10-11). Jesus suffered for us – in our place – and the result is that we have been brought to glory . . . or are promised that we will be one day – brought to the glories of life eternal in heaven for Jesus' sake.

Our lesson assures us that we can and will cry out to God, "Abba, Father," not only in suffering but also in glory. And that's not just a fancy way of saying "both in the bad times and in the good." Glory here is not being used in contrast to suffering. Rather it is referring to the glory that is awaiting us in eternity. In other words, this is a relationship and a love that will never end!

Again, how can we be so sure? Because the Spirit testifies to us about this . . . in his Word, the Bible. In our lesson he says that we are "heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ." What is God's is going to be ours. What is Christ's in heaven is going to be ours. We will "share in his glory." It's guaranteed to us because Jesus has made us heirs. What does an heir need to do to receive an inheritance? Nothing. Their parents or grandparents did all the work; they made the money; they saved and invested the money; and then they died. You, as the heir, were simply fortunate enough that they wrote you into their will and left that money to you. You simply received it, inherited it. That's the word the Bible uses time and again to explain how we will come to possess the riches of heaven – it is an inheritance and you – as a baptized child of God - are an heir of your heavenly Father.

In the book of Ephesians chapter 1, for example, the apostle Paul refers to "the hope to which [God] has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance" (vs.18). And in the book of I

Peter chapter 1, the Bible says: “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade – kept in heaven for you” (1:3-4).

And one of the things that is so especially remarkable about this inheritance is that – unlike other things you might inherit – the one who is giving it to you doesn’t have to die for you to inherit it. You and I will be able to enjoy this inheritance with our loving Father in heaven for time without end!

Picture yourself there in heaven . . . experiencing and doing unimaginable, remarkable things! Crying out in glory: “Dad, check this out! Dad, do you see me?” Knowing full well that you have your heavenly Father’s undivided attention.

God is love. Fathers, know this about him. Fathers, emulate and demonstrate this about him to your wife and children. Cry out, “Abba, Father!” – in suffering and in glory. Amen.