

CHAPTER TWO

SHOW US THE FATHER

The day was quickly waning, and the street lights had just come on. I pulled up the collar of my jacket and leaned against a telephone pole, waiting for a bus back across the river to the city in the distance. I had just come from visiting a friend in Union City, New Jersey, and was beginning the first leg of the return trip, through New York City, to Princeton, New Jersey, where I was studying philosophy in my first year of graduate school. As I stood there, I felt some of the loneliness that all of us feel at times, especially when we have left someone we are close to and are once again alone.

That loneliness was sharpened into something like pain as I watched the lights of houses come on and the dusk thicken and settle, and I experienced, on a level deeper than most of us can articulate, the background sorrow that haunts our race as day turns into night and one season to another, with a relentlessness and implacability that leaves its marks of age on us and separates us from our friends and finally from life itself, as the last night of all comes, the night of death. Who can articulate what we feel as we experience the great cosmic realities of space and time, apart from our control, moving us toward our death, separating us from other people, tearing momentary happiness and stability, touches of eternity, from our hand and lengthening the loneliness of separation and loss in the ultimate separation and loneliness of death itself? As each year goes by and we see the leaves darken and fall, the snows and frost come to

the barrenness of winter trees; we see our friends sicken and die, suffer financial loss, have their children leave home; we have yet another war break out, see the marks of aging in our own bodies. Then we increasingly wonder and yet are afraid of the answer to the question, “Can life itself be saved?”

We find, no matter how firmly we attempt to grasp and hold it, that life, with its relationships, possessions, hopes, dreams and desires, slips through our fingers. We are powerless to possess it, powerless to stop the relentless movement toward the end, death.

How we would have liked to love that person better; how we regret what we did in that situation; how we would have liked to hold on to that beautiful day, that moment of love, that hope of happiness. We are powerless to stop the movement. We can delay it, we can erect walls to slow it down or drown it out—money, medicine, music, work, relationships, theories, projects—but it relentlessly pushes through and we are all overcome, destroyed.

It all ends.

Our face smarts from the discipline. We are stunned by the deafness that meets our agonizing pleas for mercy. We are made desperate in our inner being as day passes into night. For us each day the separation from life itself progresses.

Who can save us from the relentless course of this life, which mercilessly proceeds to death? “But when the time had fully come, 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” (Galatians 4:4–5).

Even as I felt pain and loneliness on that street corner in Union City, I experienced in a new and greatly intensified way what I had already begun to experience during the eight months of my revitalized commitment to Jesus—that God was *my Father*. It was as if God

were taking off the wraps and letting me “see” more deeply and vividly how deep his love is and how personal his relationship is to me as my Father. I began to say over and over again, “Father, Father, Father,” slowly, sometimes softly under my breath, sometimes silently.

By bearing the affliction and misery of the human situation, even suffering death at our hands, Jesus has opened a way to save life from the process of death. When death had spent its full force, his Father raised him from the dead, revealing his glory and power as the only Son of God. Passing over from death to the glory of life forever, he promised that if those who heard his word and hungered for salvation put their faith in him, they would experience a new relationship with God. They would become, with Jesus, his beloved children; they would have life now in a totally new way and share eventually in the actual physical resurrection of the body.

When we sense the presence of God in Jesus and open our hearts to him, his Spirit becomes joined to our spirit. In a mysterious but very real and experiential way, we begin to partake of a new life that is not subject to sin and death. We walk in a newness of life that consists not simply in the forgiveness of sin but also in the discovery that the Father of Jesus is now our Father.

There are “seasons” of God’s action in our lives—times when he is stirring things up and times when things seem to be quiet. At these special moments and turning points, some more decisive than others, the Spirit leads us into a deeper experience of God, not for the sake of experiences but for the sake of a deeper and more abiding union with him. The Spirit unites with our weak and ignorant spirits and helps us to know, in a way that affects our emotions and memories, our past experiences and present fears, the all-surpassing love God the Father has for us.

Our Father, My Father

Standing in the cold at the bus stop, saying over and over again, “Father, Father, Father,” was such a turning point in my awareness of who he is to me. There have been others, and each one has drawn me into a deeper freedom from anxiety and a greater confidence in what God has for me.

When my first child was born, I went to look at him in the nursery. As I looked at him, something opened up deep within me. I had never experienced the love a father has before. It was partly my instinct as a man for his firstborn child, but it was also the Father within me working through me to be a father to my son, John. I experienced a depth and tenderness of love for John that I had never experienced for someone before. Through it I learned of the depth and even the fierceness of the love of God for us, his children.

Especially today when there is such sensitivity to the hurt and pain that many of us have experienced in relationships with our fathers or other men in our lives, there is a strong movement to ignore the fatherhood of God completely. And while the pain, hurt, disillusionment and anger are real, the “solution”—ignoring the fatherhood of God—is, I’m afraid, no solution at all. Precisely because of the failings of our earthly fathers (and who of us earthly fathers have not failed in some ways), we need more than ever to experience the perfect, pure, powerful love of our Father in heaven. Only there will true healing be found; only there will the deep wounds be healed. The distortions of fatherhood we may have experienced need to be healed by experiencing true fatherhood, the fatherhood of God himself.

There is something deep within us that needs to rest in the secure love of the Father, and only that will satisfy us. Therefore, as painful

and awkward as it may be, we need to open ourselves, allowing Jesus and the Spirit to show us the Father and his love.

Sometimes we hear that a person without a good earthly father can never hope to understand what it means to have God for our Father. Sometimes we are told that people cannot know the love of God the Father and know Christ as their Savior unless their standard of living is raised first through economic and political liberation. Such myths come out of ignorance of the burning love of God and his awesome power in drawing men to himself in the midst of every circumstance.

I have seen many people who suffered abuse and neglect from their human fathers directly experience the love of God and learn from that who the Father is. I know firsthand of people in the slums of Asian, African and South American cities whose hearts are bursting with the love of God the Father poured into them by the Spirit. God can overcome any obstacle to show people his love and to draw them into relationship with him.

Encountering God in the person of Jesus and coming to grips with his claims as Savior and Lord are significant, decisive steps in coming to know God. Jesus is *the* door of direct and personal access to God, but our commitment to Jesus only opens the door. We are intended by God to walk through it into the fullness of his life. Those who have committed their lives to Jesus can expect him to unfold to them a deeper and deeper knowledge and experience of God.

At the heart of Jesus' desire for his disciples is that they come to know God as their Father. In the last days of his earthly life, in fact, he spoke urgently and clearly of the relationship his disciples were to have to God as their Father, similar to the relationship that Jesus himself had with the Father. As we commit our lives to Jesus and accept him as our Savior and Lord, we need to let him show us the Father.

The disciples had a difficult time understanding much of what Jesus was about. Jesus spoke frequently throughout his life about the Father, and yet a few days before he died, Philip, out of the frustration of not quite understanding, asked him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we shall be satisfied” (John 14:8). Jesus’ response was striking: “Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father.... The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or else believe me for the sake of the works themselves” (John 14:9–11).

When we first think of the way in which Jesus reveals who God is to us, we think of his mercy and compassion in forgiving sin and healing the sick, and from these we conclude, rightly, that Jesus reveals to us the mercy and compassion of God. But Jesus is intent on revealing not just the characteristics or attributes of God but the identity of the Persons of God, the astounding fact that God is a union of three Persons and that it is into that union that he invites his disciples.

With this in mind, read the Gospel of John and notice the remarkable frequency with which Jesus speaks of his Father and the remarkable things he indicates about the relationship they are in. Seeing what relationship the Father and Son are in is very important, for it is precisely this relationship that we are offered a part in; it is into this relationship that Jesus has been preparing us to be drawn.

As I read John’s Gospel I counted 108 references that Jesus makes to his Father. He is always talking about his Father, and the picture that emerges of the relationship is one in which there is an utterly profound commitment of love between the Father and the Son and a total self-giving of one to the other.

Jesus time and time again clearly indicates that he is fully obedient to the Father (see John 8:28–29, for example), that he does nothing on his own authority and only does what pleases the Father and that he is set on doing not his own will but “the will of him who sent me” (John 6:38). Jesus indicates again and again that he teaches and speaks only what the Father gives to him to teach and speak (John 8:26–29) and, indeed, that “the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever he does, that the Son does likewise” (John 5:19). Jesus even states that what he lives or subsists on, what is food to him, is “to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work” (John 4:34).

Just as Jesus does everything to please the Father and gives his whole life in service of the Father, so too does the Father give everything to Jesus and totally commit himself to an absolute support. Just as Jesus honors the Father, so too does the Father honor the Son. The Father gives the Spirit to Jesus without reserve. This phrase characterizes their whole relationship; they give themselves to each other “without reserve.” They share a profound intimacy.

Only to the Son, who abides in the heart of the Father, has the Father shown himself fully (see John 1:18). And because of the nature of the relationship, it is through the Son that the Father gives himself to others. He has entrusted to Jesus the work of reconciling the world to him and has chosen to put “all things into his hands” (John 13:3). And he never leaves Jesus alone but is always with him (see John 16:32). Just as Jesus abides in the heart of the Father, the Father abides within Jesus and accompanies him, works with him, in all that he says and does, so much so that Jesus can say, “He who has seen me has seen the Father.... I am in the Father and the Father is in me.... I do not speak on my own authority; but the Father who dwells in me does his works” (John 14:9, 11, 10).

The total commitment that the Father and Son have to one another is finally and vividly expressed as Jesus gives himself up to suffering, crucifixion and death, as the fullest possible act of abandonment in trust of the Father possible. And the Father receives Jesus and raises him up from the dead and establishes him at his right hand, restoring Jesus to the glory he had before the world began. Jesus and the Father glorify one another, honor one another, raise one another up, out of a staggeringly profound and complete love, union and self-giving, out of a relationship that gives them a remarkable joy, peace, confidence and security. And this is the relationship into which God desires to draw us.

Jesus' Invitation

As the time approaches for Jesus to give himself completely in the crucifixion, he begins to speak more directly and pointedly to his disciples about what he has been preparing them for during the previous three years. He makes clear that the relationship that they have seen him have with his Father is a relationship that they too are being invited to enter into. Because they have joined themselves to Jesus, the Father has accepted them and taken them fully into his life and heart as sons and daughters, with Jesus. He tells them that from henceforth they will begin to experience what it means to be sons and daughters of God, to have God as their Father.

Jesus also makes clear that all that the Father gave to Jesus is being given to the disciples and that they are being called to live the same kind of relationship with the Father that Jesus lived and to have the Father work and dwell within them in the same kinds of ways. These explicit words of Jesus are so remarkable that I would like to include a number of them at this point and have you read them carefully, paying attention to what is being said. Just as the Father identified

himself with Jesus, committed himself to him fully and supported him at every turn, dwelling within him, so too do the Father and Jesus commit themselves to those who have committed their lives to Jesus.

I have said this to you in figures; the hour is coming when I shall no longer speak to you in figures but tell you plainly of the Father. In that day you will ask in my name; and I do not say to you that I shall ask the Father for you; for the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from the Father. (John 16:25–27)

I will not leave you desolate; I will come to you. Yet a little while, and the world will see me no more, but you will see me; because I live, you will live also. In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. (John 14:18–20)

If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. (John 14:23)

No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you...that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide; so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. (John 15:15–16)

Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brethren and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God. (John 20:17)

In these verses (and many others) Jesus has made it clear that his disciples are now in a direct relationship with God, that he is a Father to the followers of Jesus just as he is to Jesus, and that because his disciples have followed Jesus and been baptized, they have been “born of water and the Spirit” (John 3:5) and in the process been made “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4), sons and

daughters of God, with Jesus, sharing in a direct relationship with the Father, partaking of all the possibilities and responsibilities of such a relationship.

When we behold the depth of this relationship and realize this is precisely the relationship we are offered, we can only pray with Paul:

I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with might through his Spirit in the inner man, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, to him be glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen. (Ephesians 3:14–21)

Or as Pope John Paul II said:

When we cry “Abba, Father!” it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God (Rom 8:15–16). Here we are at the *centre of the mystery!* It is in the meeting between the Holy Spirit and the human spirit that we find the very heart of what the Apostles experienced at Pentecost. This extraordinary experience is present in the Church born of that event and accompanies her down the centuries.¹

Knowing that we are fully sons and daughters of God and discovering the implications of this relationship make all the difference for living a full and fruitful Christian life. Being able to say and know,

“*God is my Father,*” makes all the difference for prayer, love of brethren and service to others.

An eighty-five-year-old Pentecostal teacher whom I’ve known and admired over the years has a remarkable story to tell of something that happened to him just a few years ago. He was born to an English family living in India, and when he became a Christian while back in England at the university, a remarkable call was given to him that took him all over the world with great fruitfulness in his ministry. He still travels extensively today in Christian ministry. Every day of his life after his conversion as a young man, however, he would wake in the morning with a dark, oppressive presence hovering over him, and it would only be with some difficulty and prayer that the presence would leave. But it returned each morning. He attributed it to some demonic presence he had encountered in India that was continuing to harass him no matter what he did. He carried on truly heroically despite this affliction.

Then one morning a few years ago, when he and his wife woke up in the morning and began to pray in bed together, as was their morning custom, he found himself able to say for the first time, “Father, *my* Father.” What was new was the “*my*.” He had even given teachings on God our Father, but he had never been able to say “*my*” Father until that morning. The dark presence left and never returned. God is good, and he has blessings for us even in our old age.

Prayer is difficult for many because they have never appropriated the truths of God’s fatherhood. Praying to a “God” you do not quite know is different from praying confidently and joyfully to one who you *know* loves you, cares for you, hears you, is always close and is your Father. Genuine Christian prayer begins with the realization of being reborn into the family of God, being sons and daughters of the Father, brothers and sisters of Jesus, indwelt by God’s own Spirit.