

ABBA'S CHILD

Theme: The highest privilege of the Christian life and the deepest longing of our heart is to know God as our perfect Father.

Texts: Mark 1:9-11; Romans 8:15-17

What a true pleasure it is for my wife and I to join our lives with the family here at Christ Church. This privilege was only heightened by an incident that happened this week. Wanting to look presentable for today, I went to get my hair cut on Thursday. I mentioned to the stylist that I was new to the community and was joining the staff at Christ Church of Oak Brook. She said, "Oh, I can't believe it. I have heard so many good things about the church and was planning to come this Sunday." She then turned to the stylist in the next chair, and said, "Isn't one of your clients involved in the single's ministry of Christ Church?" She said glowing things about this man and added her own endorsement about what he had heard about the church. So at least in one hair salon, the buzz in the community is quite positive.

As Executive Pastor of Discipleship, I look forward to putting my oar in the water alongside Dan, the staff, and all of you as we row together in the direction that Jesus wants to take his church.

It is a bit daunting and nerve racking, as you can imagine, to preach your first sermon to a new community of people. Because I am the new kid on the block I have three goals for this morning:

(1) I want to introduce myself. I want you to get to know me a bit by inviting you into some of my journey into understanding what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. Because of this I will be more autobiographical than I might normally be.

(2) I want to explore a foundational reality that we must all grasp as the basis for being a follower of Christ. When I left my last church I said to the congregation in my final sermon that I would be happy if they had incorporated into their identity two truths in my ten years: (a) They understood themselves to be ministers of Christ and (b) they had come to see themselves as the beloved and precious children of God. It is this second truth we will explore this morning.

(3) My third goal is to open the word of God in such a way that we are grasped by this compelling truth: We are invited into the same relationship that Jesus, the Son, enjoyed with His Father. The theologian, Larry Hurtado, puts it like this: We are "enfranchised into or adopted into Jesus' status and favor in the beloved." Instead of reading the Scriptures ahead of time we will look at them in the context of the development of thought.

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Prayer

It has been broadly observed that our first impressions of God are derived from the model of our parents. Our parents are our first god figures. Our ability to trust God, to become intimate, self-revealing and personal with God, our sense as to whether God has our best interest at heart comes from the example for good or ill from what we receive from our parents.

Corrie Ten Boom, the great Dutch Christian, said that she learned to trust God even in the midst of the horrors of a German concentration camp during World War II because of the warmth of her father. She remembered fondly as a young child the nightly ritual. She would go to her bedroom door in her nightie and call out, "Papa, I'm ready for bed." Her father would come to her room and pray for her before she went to sleep. He would then place his hand gently on her face and say, "Sleep well, Corrie...I love you." She would remain very still because she wanted to feel the touch of his hand as she fell asleep. Years later while in the concentration camp, she would remember the feel of her father's hand on her face. When lying on a wretched, dirty mattress in the dehumanizing setting, she would say, "O Lord, let me feel Your hand upon me..." Her ability to sense the Fatherly presence of God in the most forsaken circumstance was in large part derived from the nightly pattern of her father's touch.

I tell Corrie Ten Boom's story with envy, because my story was quite different. Up to my father's death in early 1994 I longed for two things from him, that he was not able to give. I wanted him to allow into the interior of his emotions, and be able to interpret for me the shaping events of his life. Secondly, and even more importantly, I wanted my father to be in a position to pass on a legacy of faith to which I would live up to. I have come to see that for Christians the natural longing of our heart is to inherit a blessing. I wanted my father to be able to say to me at the end of his days, "Greg, I have lived before you all these years as best I could as a disciple of Jesus Christ. Now it is my time to pass the baton to you. It is your turn Greg to run the race. Be faithful as I have tried to be faithful." Well, for reasons I have come to understand that was not possible for my father.

Some have seriously argued that if we have had an inadequate human father, lacking in wisdom, or the ability to show affection, or worse abandoned or abused us at a vulnerable age, that we could never experience God as a loving Father. O God, I hope not. I joke with my 27 year old daughter that some day she will be probably paying some psychologist \$200 an hour to sort out her relationship with me. But the good news is that my daughter's relationship with God as her Father is not limited to her experience with me. To paraphrase J. I. Packer, there is a Father who is faithful in love and care, generous and

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thoughtful, interested in all we do, skillful in training, wise in guidance, always available, helping us to find ourselves in maturity and integrity--whether we could say "I have or had a wonderful father", or "my father disappoints or disappointed me" or "I hate my father" or "I never had one." Experiencing God as perfect Father certainly is far more difficult to get to for those who spirit have experienced greater damage or deficit, but God can re-parent us and give us what we have not had.

This leads us to the center of what Jesus came to restore through his work on the cross. I believe that Jesus came to adopt us into the family circle, and invite us the same love relationship that He experienced from the Father. C. S. Lewis wrote, *"The son of God became a man to enable men and women to become the children of God."* Jesus opened the way for us to enjoy the overflow of love that the Father had for the Son. What is that love? We get a window into it at inauguration of Jesus' ministry. Jesus' ministry was launched when He presented Himself to John for baptism. As Jesus emerged from the river the presence of Spirit descended upon in the form of a dove, empowering him for ministry, and then the voice of Father spoke the word of affirmation.

The gospel writers nuanced these words in a little different fashion. Mark captures the Father's remarks in the first person as a personal intimate address from Father to Son, *"You are my Son, the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased."* The crowds were allowed eavesdrop on this intimate moment of affection. The Father above all else wanted the Son to know the place that He had in his heart as he entered his public ministry. The heavens couldn't contain the Father's delight in his Son. The Father had to speak his affection. But Matthew has the voice from the heavens speaking in the third, not addressing Jesus but the listening crowd. *"This is my Son, the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased."* Here is a proud Papa whose buttons are bursting with pride over his kid. I want everyone to know that this is my child. Every parent has had those moments where we wanted to stand up and shout shamelessly, "That is my kid." Memorial day weekend was one of those moments. Our daughter received her hood as a MD from Brown University. To top it all she got the award as the outstanding female graduate. When it came time for her name to be read and the hood to be presented her father was on his feet making a shameless fool of himself shouting at the top of his lungs something like, "Way to go Aimee!" The Father's voice resounds through the universe, "This is my Son." This is why I believe Eugene Peterson has captured the intent of these words of the Father so well in [The Message](#), *"You are my Son, marked and chosen by my love, pride of my life."*

As I have reflected on this text I have wondered, *"Of all the things that the Father could have said to the Son at this beginning of his ministry, why these words?"* Frankly, I can think of a lot things the Father could have said. A little

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coaching talk: *"Go get 'em kid. Show them your stuff."* A word of caution for the tough times ahead: *"Don't let those so and so's get you down."* Perseverance could have been his theme: *"Hang in there to the end."* A reminder of his mission: *"Show them how much we love them, Son. I am with you all the way."*

Why these personal words of affection? Because the deepest need of even Jesus' life was to know what He meant to the Father; that He was the apple of His eye. As Jesus stood on the threshold of a public ministry that was destined for a cross, the Father wanted His Son to know that even when life turned bleak that the altered state of reality was He was "beloved of the Father." Baptism was Jesus' coming out moment, and the only place of ultimate safety was to be hidden in the heart of the Father.

Let me see if I can draw a parallel to a human experience. As a Dad I can remember as if it were yesterday the feelings that surrounded the sending of our daughter off to college. There are few moments that tug a parent's heart with deeper feeling than when for you part from your child's embrace and for the first time walk out of their college dorm room. You know its time for the bird to fly, but the take off is a mixture of sweetness and sadness. Being one who expresses my feelings on paper, I wrote our daughter a letter that stated my message to her. Being a preacher I had to have Biblical text for my letter and it was the one of this morning's message. The letter went like this,

"Dear Beloved Aimee, When Jesus was about to be launched into his public ministry, His Father had a message for him, "You are my son, whom I love, with you I am well pleased." This is my message for you my child, "You are my daughter, whom I love, with you I am well pleased."

"Aimee, the most important message I could ever transmit to you is that you have a heavenly Father, who because of what Jesus has done for you, says, 'Aimee, you are my daughter, whom I love, with you I could not be prouder.' To know that you are infinitely valued by God and that He takes delight in you is the truth upon which to build your life."

"The Father knew that the Son had great sorrow and grief ahead. Things were not going to be easy along the way. Just as I know you will have bumps and bruises, mixed with joy and celebrations, ahead for you. When your faith is challenged by those who want to rob you of something you cherish; when you are fearful about who your friends will be; when self doubt turns to questioning, 'do I have what it takes'; or when you are not sure of your direction, what makes all the difference in life is that we are loved. We are special to someone. We are not instantly rescued from life's difficulties, but we can bear anything when we know that we have a loving Father who will never abandon us in our moment of need."

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In the Father's affirmation of the Son, a window was thrown open into heaven so that we could see that we are called into the same affection that the Father has for Jesus. What was the intimacy that the Son shared with the Father? It was in the garden of Gethsemane, just hours before his appointment with the cross, Jesus finds a lonely place with his disciples a few feet away, to pour his heart out in anguish to the Father. It is here that Jesus addresses his Father with the most intimate of words, "Abba, Father, remove this cup from me (meaning the cup of his sacrificial death on the cross), yet not what I want, but what you want." (Mark 14:36) Abba is an Aramaic word. When Jesus was beset emotionally he returned to the language of a child and his childhood language. Many would argue that Jesus spoke Greek as the language of the day. But when his life was in jeopardy he reverted to his language of origin. "Abba". Daddy, Papa. The Old Testament scholar Joachim Jeremias found no reference in the ancient literature where someone would have dared use such familiar terms for the distant, holy God who was first and foremost to be revered. In the moment of his abandonment, Jesus became the trusting child who heard at the start of his ministry, *"You are my son, the beloved..."* Jesus held onto that and expressed the kind of relationship that we could have with the Father because of the door He opened through the cross.

The Spirit that emanates from the mutual affection and revelry that the Son and Father enjoyed is implanted in those who recognize their need to be reconciled to the Father through the faith in the Son. We are then included in the family and the same Spirit, which was upon Jesus, is implanted in us. So Paul describes our status and experience, what makes us Christian in Roman 8:15, 16, *"For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received the spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba, Father!' it is the very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God..."*

J. I. Packer gives this simple definition of what it means to be a Christian, *"What is a Christian? The question can be answered in many ways, but the richest answer I know is that a Christian is one who has God for his Father."* We are then included in the spillover of love that the Father has for the Son, so that just as Jesus experienced God as His "Abba", we too as adopted children can know God as our "Abba."

Even though I may state this as a matter of fact, the truth that I am a beloved child of the Father has been the most difficult reality to get into my gut. Let me take you into my interior struggle to find God as my Father. A theme of brokenness that has run throughout my life is the debilitating effects of fear and anxiety. It was this need that led me to Christ in the first place. As a 12-year-old seventh grader, who sporadically attended church, I was overwhelmed with fear. I did not handle the transition from the elementary years to Junior High well. I

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was fearful on many fronts: afraid I was going to fail my classes, afraid that I could not match up athletically, and deathly afraid that I would not have friends. Many a night was spent crying myself to sleep unable to handle this anxiety. It was during this seventh grade year that I responded to an invitation to go to a weekend church camp knowing only one other kid who was there. On Saturday morning an invitation was given for any of us who like to respond to Jesus' invitation "come to me all you are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest." Rest was what I needed. We were instructed to get out of our seats and go across the street and meet with a counselor who would lead us to a relationship with Christ. My problem I was sitting next to the only friend I had and I was afraid as to what he would think if I responded. Yet the draw was so strong that I fled in tears. The counselor asked me a series of questions such as "Do you acknowledge your need for forgiveness?" "Do you want to accept Jesus as your Savior?" I was saying, "Yes" as quickly as the questions were coming from his lips. Immediately I was immersed in a bath of love. Waves of love began to wash over me. I can remember sitting on a rock that morning, just allowing myself to soak in the warmth and radiance of the love of God. **My life has been perfect ever since.**

Hardly. In some ways that experience masked the deeper roots of this fear and anxiety, which would continue to evidence itself sometimes very debilitating ways. I had a fear and self-consciousness around authority figures, feeling intimidated and dwarfed in their presence. I feared trying new and risky things. I feared embracing what I believed was God's call on my life to influence the next generation of pastors in terms of a model of ministry. This all came to a head in the Winter of 1986. I had been serving on the staff with Darrell in West Los Angeles, when he was called to the Philippines. The joy of our shared ministry suddenly left my future up in the air. As an Associate in a Presbyterian church, you are not allowed to be considered for the senior position. The uncertainty about my future, kicked me in a period of fear and anxiety that was so intense that I would awake each day for three months with my stomach tied up in knots. Try as I might to entrust my future to a God who cared for me and had a purpose for me, I couldn't get there.

I finally said, "I have to do something about this and get to the root of the problem." I asked two dear friends who had a ministry of inner healing prayer to enter in an extended time of prayer after describing to them as best I could the nature of what I was experiencing. Frankly, it was good just have others listen and hear the depth of my heart's anguish. If you have even been involved in this type of prayer, you know that often you are asked to visualize certain scenes and attempt to see Jesus as present. Some people apparently see vivid images in technicolor. I can hold a visual image in my head for a micro-millisecond. But this time I was able to see an image of Jesus that I have been able to hold onto this day. In this mental image Jesus was dressed in

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blazing white robe with his arms outstretched cradling me as a five or six year old draped across arms. All of a sudden Jesus thrust his head back in joyful laughter and began to spin around in delight over me. In that moment some deep healing began to take place beyond my full understanding. All I know is from that moment on a process of healing has been occurring to the point where I was able to embrace God's call upon me to have an influence upon the next generation of pastors and model of ministry and a radical subsiding of the experience of fear in my inner being.

During this same three month period I had been reading a paragraph from J. I. Packer's book Knowing God, as a part of a daily prayer, attempting to pray its reality into my being. Here is a truth upon which to build our lives, that has increasingly been my reality. It is written under the heading, "Love is the complete truth about God so far as Christians are concerned."

"As a believer, I find in the cross of Christ assurance that I, as an individual, am beloved of God; 'the Son of God...loved me and gave himself for me.' (Gal. 2:20). Knowing this, I am able to apply to myself, the promise that all things work together for good to them that love God and are called according to his purpose (Romans 8:28) Not just some things, but all things. Every single thing that happens to me expresses God's love for me, and comes to me for the furthering of God's purposes for me. Thus, so far as I am concerned, God is love to me—holy, omnipotent love—at every moment and in every event of every day's life. Even when I cannot see the why and the wherefore of God's dealings, I know that when there is love in and behind them, and so I can rejoice always, even when, humanly speaking, things are going wrong. I know that the true story of my life, when known, will prove to be, as the hymn says, 'mercy from first to last'—and I am content."

I may have not gotten all that I wanted in a human father, and I am sure my father had regrets about what he was not able to be, as I do with my daughter. But I have a Father who is able to be all that I need. I have come to believe that I am included in the family of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and can hear the Father say to me, "Greg, you are my son, marked and chosen by my love, the pride of my life." What the Father said to the Son, he says to you and me who have been adopted in the family. God's Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God and we too, cry "Abba, Daddy, Papa" and we know we are home.

We get included in the family circle. It has been enlarged and we are drawn in. Perhaps this analogy will bring the wonder of this grace home. Suppose Christ Church were to have a church family picnic at a nearby Park at 3:30 this afternoon. Because of a busy afternoon you haven't given much thought to what you would bring to eat. You rush by your house to throw

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something together. In your refrigerator you find one slice of stale baloney, a bit of mustard scraped from a crusty jar, and two moldy piece of white bread. You slap it together and off you go. You sit down at the end of picnic table and lay your spread out before you. As good fortune would have it you choose the same table of a family where the mother has been cooking for days. Your eyes become as large as saucers when she pulls from her basket most gorgeous, plump, golden brown fried chicken, baked beans that have simmered for days, potato salad to die for, and to top it off two huge chocolate cream pies. You look down at your brown paper bag and puny, dried out sandwich. Then you hear words that you can hardly believe. The family says to you, *"Why don't we put it all together?"* You object, *"No, I couldn't do that. I just couldn't think of it."* They respond, *"Oh, come on, there's plenty of chicken and pie and everything—and we just love baloney sandwiches. Let's put it all together."* And so you do and there you sit—eating like a king, when you came like an orphan.

Does it seem too good to be true that we are included in the family? Because of what Jesus has done to be the purchase price for entry into the relationship that Jesus shares with the Father, can you hear him say to you, "Don, Grant, Irene, Shirley, you are my son/daughter, chosen and marked by my love, pride of my life." The highest privilege of the Christian life and the deepest longing of our hearts is to know God as our perfect Father. Welcome home.