

WHO IS THE GOD YOU PRAY TO?

Mark 14: 32-38; Romans 8: 14-17, Galatians 4: 4-7

When I first came to Armour Heights six years ago, there was a book club that would gather at the church once a month on a Tuesday evening. There was a core group that met faithfully. After a few months, we decided to try it on Sunday after church with some lunch. Perhaps, that could attract some new people. It worked. More people participated. One of the books we discussed was a recently published novel by Miriam Toews called: *Women Talking*. I found it really powerful. I was reminded of it just recently as the novel was made into an award winning film, screened at the Cannes film festival, aired in theatres afterwards, and now available for streaming.

I watched it a few weeks ago and was reminded why I loved the book so much. The story takes place in a Mennonite colony in South America. It is a closed community, which means the people only associate with each other. It is very traditional in that men hold the power and make all the decisions. Women are not educated, taught to read or write, and are simply there to do the chores, bear children and raise them. It may be a terrible life but it's all they know. But something even more sinister takes place in this particular community. The women are regularly drugged with cow fertilizer and violated by the men. This goes on for a long time until women start talking and discover what is happening. They react and the men are confronted. They are charged and then removed from the community by police authorities and held for trial.

The threat for the women, however, is that in a man's world, once the men gather enough money to make bail, they will return, and once they return, there will be payback. And so, the women have a short window of time to decide what they should do. There are three options they come up with: First they can do nothing, which is basically what they have been taught to do all their lives. Second, they can stay and fight. This means they would have to betray their pacifist beliefs that violence is never the answer and leads to sin. Third, they can decide to leave and avoid the violence altogether.

While this may be straightforward for us as far as choices go, the women have been indoctrinated by men to be passive victims. They are taught that God is male and that if they leave they will not be forgiven. Only the men whom they have had arrested can forgive them. And yet, they talk and they struggle with whether forgiveness is also giving permission to the men and enabling them to keep abusing the women. And more, is it possible that the God the women have been taught to fear and obey is a false God created by the men to reinforce their power and control over the women?

I won't tell you what happens although some of you who have read the book or watched the movie already know. What I do want to say, though, is that the women are only empowered to act when their conception of God changes. Until they discover a God of empowering love rather than one of judgement and condemnation, they will not be free. Giving up their faith in God is not an option for most of them. Discovering a different revelation and understanding of God is what truly liberates them like it liberated enslaved Hebrews in ancient Egypt.

And you know, this story has been played out over and over again throughout history, even as it plays itself out in our world today too. What do I mean? Let's tackle this theme by engaging our scripture readings this morning.

Jesus uses a very special term for God, and because it's so special, both the gospel writers and Paul refer to this term in its original language – Aramaic. Even though the gospels and Paul are written in Greek, the term for God they use in our readings is the Aramaic: “Abba.” This is the original language Jesus and the people around him would have spoken. Why use “Abba” instead of the regular word: “father”? Because Jesus wants to break with the more traditional term “father” as it was commonly understood in his world. And Paul clearly picks this up also with his reference to “Abba.” The world then was dominated by men and men held the power over women. It was a world where the role of a man and the role of a father were very clearly defined. Step out of that role and your identity would come into question. Is it any different today? Traditional patriarchy may be breaking down in our part of the world, but there's still a long way to go.

OK, so in order to appreciate how Jesus relates to his father God with his use of “Abba” to connect with God, we need to also confront some truth about Jesus scholars only more recently have been able to recognize. The stranglehold of patriarchy on biblical interpretation and translation has only recently begun to break down. As the eldest son of a household with no earthly father, (Joseph is no longer mentioned when Jesus is an adult), there would be clear expectations of Jesus. As an eligible bachelor there would be clear expectations of Jesus. As any male with a natural aspiration to fatherhood, there would be clear expectations of Jesus. As a young man, no longer living at home, not married, not producing children, and associating with a number of women and single women and some with dubious backgrounds; as a single man having close relationships with women that has nothing to do with sex, but rather deep human connection and an intimacy that is friendship; by doing this and living this way, Jesus is breaking many key taboos and expectations as a man in his world.

Many in his world would have labelled Jesus not only a-typical a man, but deficient a man. Or, given Jesus' empathic reference to eunuchs in the gospel, he could easily be labelled a eunuch himself, something Jesus would have clearly had no issues with. Of course, there is no explicit reference to Jesus that way, but if you reread the gospels with openness to this perspective

there is much to suggest Jesus would be discredited as messiah by his failure to live up to his maleness as much as for any other reason.

So what is maleness in his world then? Well, we've already alluded to it. As the eldest son Jesus would be responsible for providing for his family and protecting his family. He would also need to marry and father children. He would have to be strong and firm, leaving any emotional connection and intimacy between parent and child to the mother. You certainly don't expose your vulnerability as a male in that world and certainly not to your children! Jesus definitely fails the test of being a credible man and a successful man aspiring to be a father in his world.

But there's more. Jesus' personal gender identity also spills over into his relationship and connection to God. Or is the God he prays to and the God in him also gender-bending? Now we're ready to dive into our scripture readings!

In our gospel reading, Jesus has just finished his last supper with the disciples, and he takes a few of them to a quiet place where he hopes they will stand guard while he goes by himself to pray. Prayer is talk with God. How would you and I talk to our fathers in that world or in any world? Many of us would have a certain formality. We would want to expose our strength, not our weakness. We would want a pep talk and a cheer, but we would definitely not want to expose our fear, our uncertainty and anything that would make us seem weak. And yet, this is exactly what Jesus does. He knows what is the right thing to do. He must finish what he has started and confront the authorities with the false God they have constructed to keep their people enslaved through fear, desperation and hopelessness. He anticipates he will suffer and be killed. He wants to trust in God's vindication of him and resurrection of him whatever that will look like and however that will come. But he's downright terrified! In his own words: "I am deeply grieved, even to death"!

And then, he goes off by himself to really bear his soul before his Abba God. He confesses that he doesn't know if he can go through with it. He even asks in his deepest moment of fearful weakness for Abba to let him off the hook. But of course, it's not Abba who is demanding anything of him like some patriarch. Jesus has come to this decision himself because he and his Abba are one in mind and heart. But fear and terror is creating division in Jesus, a division between the will to do what is right and the desire to run away. Wow! "Not my will but yours be done" is like saying, regardless of my fear, I will choose to love and find the courage to go through with it even if I will be tortured and killed for it.

It's not that Abba challenges Jesus to man up and stop being a coward. No. Jesus finds his courage by feeling the intimacy of love and trusting that this love will carry him through this last and final ordeal to the other side. Imagine if we could go to our fathers with all the vulnerability of our fear, our sense of failure, and our tears in search of understanding, compassion and attentive presence. This is Abba! And the gospels highlight this moment in Jesus' story before

his crucifixion to encourage all those who would follow Jesus not only to adjust their images of what a father should and could be, but also who God truly is as Jesus reveals God. God is Abba (or Amma if you prefer the female version). And Abba God is not a prisoner of cultural stereotypes and gender boxes set up by society.

And what about Paul? Well, Paul picks this up and makes explicit what the gospels make implicit, namely, that as Jesus is God's biological child in a sense, we are welcomed in as adopted children, fully siblings with Jesus and therefore fully welcomed to connect with God as our Abba too. And more. Paul refers to how our relationship with God as Abba liberates us from what he calls "slavery" to fear. In a world where slavery was commonplace, the idea that slavery was not just some external reality, but also an internal one, is very powerful. Imagine if to be a slave because of your race or poverty or colonial violence is no worse than being a slave to your fear: fear of punishment, fear of judgement, fear because of guilt or shame, fear because society makes you feel inadequate and worthless...

As Paul reminds believers, to receive the Spirit of God is to receive a spirit not of "slavery to fall back into fear" but a "spirit of adoption." When a believer cries up to God as their "Abba", it is the Spirit of Jesus, the Holy Spirit empowering them with faith in a new identity as children of God and joint heirs with Christ. Even as they may go through suffering and even as they may carry their own cross through life, they will also be glorified as Christ has been glorified.

Isn't this amazing! Our relationship with Abba liberates us from internal slavery. And this is just like the Hebrews of old enslaved in Egypt. Until they were liberated internally from their fear and until they encountered God as their Abba, they could never find the courage and determination to fight for their external freedom.

So then, this brings it all to us here today. Whether we are fathers ourselves or whether we seek out a good image of a father for ourselves, in what ways are we imprisoned and enslaved by society's stereotypes, norms, expectations or our own bad experiences? In what ways do we need to be liberated? In what ways does fear still live in us? In what ways may Abba God become the source of our empowerment as we build an intimacy of relationship and connection? Jesus leaned on Abba in his final hour. Paul encourages believers to follow Jesus and do the same. Freedom is not just an external thing. Until it lives inside us we will never be free. We need Abba God to lead us once again through an exodus into freedom.

PRAYER: On this father's day, we come to you anew, our Abba God. We call on you to meet us where we are. We are strong but sometimes weak. We are capable, but sometimes feel helpless. We know we are loved, but sometimes we question whether we are worthy. Remind us that we are your children, O God, like you reminded and empowered Jesus in his final hour. Give us the courage to choose what is true over what is false, what is right over what is easy. In Jesus name we pray to you our Abba/Amma God, Amen.

