

groups, but I also thank the other members of the groups for telling their own stories and listening to mine.

Other friends with whom I shared part of what I have written, who have propped me up when I was flagging, and who often made extremely useful suggestions include Terri Bolotin, Bettie Banks, Cynthia Blakeley, Rebecca Chopp, Pam Couture, Gail O'Day, Lauree Hersch-Meyer, Greg Jones, Luke Johnson, Bill Mallard, Melanie May, Sally Purvis, Bruce Robbins, Don Saliers, Melissa Walker, and the sisters of St. Benedict's Convent, St. Joseph, Minnesota.

Finally, it is a pleasure to thank Ulrike Guthrie at Abingdon Press, an excellent, supportive, and patient editor, and a special person to me for a very long time.

*From  
Memories of God:  
Theological Reflections on a Life.  
Roberta Bondi  
Abingdon Press, 1995*

## Wearing Away the Heart: Praying to God the Father



Long ago, when I was a little girl living in New York City, every summer my mother, my two little brothers, and I would pack up our suitcases and turn our backs on my Yankee father to take an overnight train to my grandparents' farm in Union County, Kentucky. Once there, we would visit and be visited for part of each day by an enormous assortment of aunts and uncles, great-aunts and uncles, all their children, my first and second cousins, and my great-grandparents as well.

It was an overwhelming experience for an over-serious, shy city child who spent most of the rest of the year in books. So much of it, like taking baths in a tin washtub on the kitchen floor, using the outhouse in the

chicken yard, and seeing actual milk coming out of live cows, was exotic. Much of it was intensely boring. The farm rhythms of early rising and early bedtimes, the country distances, and long, silent hours between the relatives' visits made the time in Union County pass with vivid slowness. Aching homesickness for my father made the time go even more slowly.

I always perked up at the beginning of the second week of our visit when it was time for vacation Bible school and revival at Pond Fork Baptist Church, my family's little white frame church out in the fields by the Great Ditch. Every morning for Bible school all the children would gather for country hymns in the old-fashioned sanctuary. Then my class would go for an hour to a little room in the gallery on the second floor at the back of the church for the Bible lessons. Mostly, these consisted of memorizing Bible verses and hearing Old Testament stories of God rescuing children from bad situations—stories of Isaac on the mountain with Abraham, for example, or of Joseph thrown into the pit by his brothers. I also remember one spectacular occasion when my great-aunt Jenny, who was teaching the class, recited the names of all the books of the Old Testament in one breath. I still can see her round face getting redder and redder, her eyes glazing over, and the little spray of spit that appeared toward the latter prophets! At the end of the morning, we would have

Kool-aid and cookies, then finish up with work on some plaster-of-Paris crafts project. It was very satisfying.

Every night, I would come back for the revival with my great-aunts, and this would be a more ambiguous experience. I loved the music; we always sang hymns like "Throw Out the Life Line" and "Revive Us Again" at the tops of our voices, accompanied by a honky-tonk piano. The prayers, on the other hand, were interminable, and there was too much scripture. But the main event was the message—they never called it a sermon. To this I would listen with excitement and dread, leaning, for what safety I could snatch, first against Great-aunt Jenny on one side of me, and then against Great-aunt Nacky on the other.

Brother Smith's message was always the same, and it was not designed for the easy listening of children. "Sinners!" he would shout. "You are all sinners! Are you ready for hell? Do you think you can keep your sins hidden from your heavenly Father? Don't you think your own Father knows what you do in secret? Do you think he can't see into your hearts? That there will be no day of reckoning? Well, I'm here to tell you judgment is coming and it's coming soon! Aren't you afraid?" Soon, I would be huddled down and shivering, not just afraid but terrorized, in my starched sundress between my two big aunts. Brother Smith would go on in this vein for a good long while, then he would shift gears and start preaching John 3:16. "Yes," he would say,

"you are a sinner," his voice dropped to a whisper. "But your heavenly Father loves you. He *loves* you enough to send his Son to *die* for you and your sins. Only believe, only believe God loves you, or he'll send you to hell for ever!"

During the altar call, while I sang all the verses of "Just As I Am Without One Plea," I would try my best to flee from the wrath to come by believing that my heavenly Father loved me, sins and all—only I could not believe it. How could God love me in spite of my sins if they were bad enough to make God's own Son die?

After a few days, the revival would be over. We would spend one final week in Union County, and I would take back my yearly allotment of full-color nightmares about God the Father to New York, where they confirmed my ever-growing sense of guilt over the secret rage and grief I felt toward the human father I loved.

The source of my nightmares was the assumption that my heavenly Father was like my earthly father, only more so. My earthly father, whom I worshiped and resented in equal measure, was a remarkable man. He was brilliant, funny, and full of life. He was a loving man, but in those years of his youth, he also tolerated no imperfections or weakness in other people, no laziness, no disobedience from his children or his wife, no sullenness, no arguing with him or asking "why." As for his attitudes toward women and men, he held to an

exaggerated version of the cultural stereotypes of the forties and fifties. He only respected men who were highly intelligent and would stand up to him and argue with him. These same qualities in a woman, however, he found contemptible. The woman who won my father's approval could not win his respect. A good woman was sweet and pliant, quiet and obedient. I not only knew I could not be sweet, pliant, quiet, and obedient; I also knew I did not want to be that way. But I had to be! How else could I be, if I were female? I loved my father so much, yet I knew I could never please him. I was angry with him and guilty over my poisonous secret, anger. I could not possibly believe my human father loved me as I was. And if this was true of my earthly father, how much more must this be the case with my heavenly Father. Surely, my heavenly Father's standards for females had to be stricter than my earthly father's.

When I was eleven and a half, shortly after we returned from our summer trip, my parents were suddenly and unexpectedly divorced. Within two months, Mother and I and my two brothers had moved to Kentucky. After that, I saw my father only once a year during a very painful visit.

In the following years of my adolescence, through college, seminary, and into graduate school in England, my feelings and my expectations about my human and my heavenly Father continued to be mixed together. I

longed for God, as I longed for my father, but I knew I was not perfect, and I could never figure out how to reconcile all the conflicting expectations they seemed to put on me as a woman. My inadequacies filled me with guilt, and my femaleness overwhelmed me with shame.

Of course, all this affected the rest of my relationships, to myself and my work, to my family, to authority figures, especially if they were male. And almost all of it was tangled up in those bad old days of the fifties and sixties with the cultural expectations, in which the church so richly shared, about women, and their inferiority to men.

As I entered adulthood, I lived out my ambiguities, longings, and helplessness in many ways. I played out my simultaneous attraction and repulsion toward God the Father by going to seminary and the first part of graduate school to study not Christian theology but Hebrew and Old Testament. I had had glimpses in those Old Testament stories in vacation Bible school of a God who did not throw people into outer darkness, where there is wailing and gnashing of teeth. I avoided courses in the New Testament, church history, or theology. I sat in classrooms and tutorials in terror of male teachers and students and the judgments they might pass on me. I worried that there was something wrong with me for wanting to be in those male preserves at all. I tried not to see or think about my human father any more often than I could help; I tried to lay aside the parts of myself

that had most suffered in my relationship with my father. As for God, I found that in public prayer, the very use of the name Father would regularly fill me with a sense of inadequacy, helplessness, and depression.

All of this is very interesting, no doubt, but I tell it not because I am so infinitely fascinating. I tell it because in many different versions it is the personal history of so many people—women, and a surprising number of men, too, if you take out the parts about being female. For so many of us the language of God the Father, and our own painful experiences of ourselves and our human fathers are tangled together. So many of us think we have no choice but to cut off great chunks of ourselves as we handle the pain, by either *refusing* to call God father at all, or by using father language without allowing ourselves (or others) to *question* what this language means to us.

How has this situation for so many people come to be? For the early church, being made in the image of God implies a correspondence between ourselves as human beings and God, in which God is the original and human beings are the images. Practically speaking, this means for our Christian ancestors, that, in an unfallen state, if anyone wanted to know what it means to be a human being, we could find out by looking at God. At the same time, they believed, we ought to be able to learn about God by looking at human beings. Because human fatherhood *ought* to be the image of

God's fatherhood, therefore, if we wanted to know what God's fatherhood is truly like, we would find out by looking at our relationships with our own fathers and the people and perhaps the institutions in our lives who stood in the place of fathers for us.

Unfortunately, we do not live in an unfallen world. The primary and earliest place we do learn about fatherhood, human and divine, is from our own fathers, but the fatherhood we learn about is not unfallen fatherhood. In the world of experience, because our own fathers were wounded, even when they long to, they never do perfectly image God's fatherhood. Without even meaning to, and sometimes even trying very hard not to, they have wounded us, their children, by the way they were fathers, just as we wound our own children, and so, without intending to, our fathers pass on a wounded image of God's fatherhood as well.

But even if we have been able to enjoy the blessing of growing up with a human father who does come close to embodying the life-giving qualities of God's fatherhood, none of us is free of the terrible pull of these fallen and destructive images of human fatherhood. Our larger culture still suggests to us fathers are somehow by nature authoritarian and perfectionistic, that they are powerful, dominant over or exploitive of the women in their lives, emotionally distant, stoic in the expression of feelings, more concerned with the abstract than the practical.

Throughout Christian history, like Brother Smith at Pond Fork Baptist Church's revivals, our churches have made it far worse by suggesting that what we experience as the destructive characteristics of a fallen fatherhood are not only *not* destructive, but are truly modeled on God's own self. Through most of Christian history, for example, right into our present time, churches have barred women from ordination, or devalued women if they were ordained, because women were "less" than the full image of God's maleness. But women are not the only ones who have suffered. The churches have used this distorted image of God the Father to shore up the often destructive authority of our institutions, secular as well as sacred, over against the poor and dispossessed, the very people to whom our churches were meant to bring the gospel. We need to recognize our churches' complicity in distorting the image of God the Father, and we need a way out of the impasse in which such a damaged image leaves us.

As for myself, the beginning of my way out came early in the second half of my graduate work at Oxford, as a result of a liberating and life-changing encounter with the tradition of the church itself. I had begun my graduate work in Hebrew and Old Testament. Now, through a number of unlikely circumstances, I found myself in the Bodleian Library unhappily searching for a dissertation topic amongst piles of early Christian texts. Day after day I read page after page of Christian

literature, and each page lay as heavy on my heart as Brother Smith's revival messages.

Then, one day, late in a dusty autumn morning well into my despair, I opened in the middle of a book with the unpromising title *The Thirteen Ascetical Homilies of Philoxenus of Mabbug*. It was a collection of homilies written in the tradition of the first great Christian monks of the Egyptian desert. Though I knew nothing of them at the time, I can tell you now that these monks were a puzzling group of people because they were the great heroes of the ancient Christian world at the very same time they challenged everything their world seemed to stand for. By their own lives and teaching, they offered radical Christian alternatives to the ordinary life patterns of the culture—alternatives to the social order, to gender expectations and family, to the uses of money and power, dominance and submission—which the rest of the Christian world took for granted. God's love for humankind was the foundation of their radical Christian vision; our love for God and neighbor was its goal. But I knew nothing of all this, confronted in the library by the *Thirteen Ascetical Homilies*.

Unknown to me as the monks were, however, the contents of that book began to open my eyes at once to another reality, in which I would learn that God was very different from the one I had thought God to be, and that this was going to have immense repercussions for me.

What I read that day was an exhortation to those early monks not to criticize or judge one another, but rather, to treat one another with the gentleness of our heavenly Father, who especially loves the ones the world despises, and who is always so much more willing than human beings to make allowances for sin, because God alone understands our circumstances, the depths of our temptations, and the extent of our sufferings.

I read, and I was astounded. God the Father is gentle and makes allowances? God the Father especially loves the castoffs? What would this mean, if this really were true? Was God really uninterested in sin? Could God the Father expect *less* of me than my human father? Could God the Father *want* and even *like* women the church I knew rejected? I did not then know the answers to these questions, but I knew that somehow these people who lived nearly a millennium and a half ago had spoken to me directly out of their own love, and of God's love for me. I resolved on the spot to spend my scholarly life in the company of those early monastic teachers, and to let them teach me what they could of the God they clearly loved and whom they clearly experienced as loving them as well. And this is what I have done.

Of course, my whole life did not change at once; the monastic teachers themselves insist that God rarely heals in any "all of a sudden" way without a very long back-and-forth movement of God's grace, insight, and

our own very hard work. But over the next many years I began to get some glimpses into their understanding of what it means to be Christian that started to turn my view of God's fatherhood upside down.

I discovered first of all that for the monastic teachers humility is the key virtue that is both the starting point and the enabler of the whole Christian experience. What they meant by humility, however, had little to do with the modern, everyday use of the term. For them, humility was not about groveling before God or other human beings. It had nothing to do with being passive, being a doormat, or glorifying having a poor self-image. It was certainly not a virtue recommended to women or poor people so that they would accept their place in society.

No, humility for the ancient teachers meant accepting ourselves and others just as we are, limitations, vulnerabilities, and major imperfections included, as already equally valuable and beloved of God without our having to prove our worth by what we accomplish, what we own, what we do right, or by our status in society and in the church. This meant that humility was about slipping underneath the whole hierarchical social web of judgments by which we limit ourselves and one another in order to love and act fearlessly with power and authority.

The guarantee of this humility for the monastic teachers is that it is grounded in the humility of God, as we

meet it in the person of Jesus. Think of it!—the humility of God, who has no need to prove God's power and might over human beings, who absolutely does not desire to dominate us, or bend us to God's will. God the Father? Dimly, I was beginning to see that this person might not be the one I had thought.

I wanted humility. I knew by now, however, that humility was not a virtue the ancient teachers thought human beings acquire all at once by gritting their teeth and becoming humble. Like all the qualities of God's love in which human beings are made to share by virtue of the image of God, humility, they believed, is formed in us as a disposition only over a very long time. A vital part of the process of formation was a daily practice of prayer, including most especially reading and mulling over scripture. Because by now I wanted so badly what they had, the monastic teachers had convinced me that it was worth the risk to try, with their help, to enter into a relationship of daily prayer with this God who was turning out to be so different from the one I had so long thought God was. This is what I did.

Once begun, I was on a journey into a nearly unknown territory. Painfully, over a matter of years, with the monastic teachers' help, I was able to lay aside my modern assumptions about prayer. I gave up the idea that prayer is about finding peace, or about accepting whatever happens in life, no matter how tragic, as the will of God. I abandoned the notion that prayer is

basically verbal, petition and praise, and came to see that prayer is a sharing of the whole self and an entire life with God. With a great wrench, I set aside the conviction that the process of moving closer to God in prayer should also be a process by which we discard the damaged parts of ourselves of which we are most ashamed. I learned instead that just the opposite is true, that prayer is a process of gathering in and reclaiming the lost and despised and wounded parts of ourselves, even those parts that could not speak the word *father* without suffering and shame.

In short, I discovered for myself that one of the major works of prayer is ongoing, over-a-lifetime healing, and some of this healing involves very painful work. One of the monastic teachers was once asked, "Of all the virtues, which is the most difficult to practice?" "It is prayer," he replied, for "prayer is warfare to the last breath."<sup>1</sup> Prayer, I learned, is warfare to the last breath because so much of the healing work of prayer involves gaining knowledge of our own hearts as we strive to understand our actual feelings, attitudes, convictions, and motivations. "Not understanding what has happened prevents us from going on to something better," the teacher Poemen used to say.<sup>2</sup> Keeping ourselves at the introspective work of facing "what has happened"

1. Agathon 9, in *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, trans. Benedicta Ward (Oxford: Mowbray, 1981), pp. 21-22.

2. Poemen 200, *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, p. 194.

head on in the presence of God can be so hard and so painful that sometimes we would almost rather die than do it. I began this very painful, introspective work of prayer.

It was a long time, however, before I was able to face directly the whole issue of fatherhood in my prayer. At last, however, I had learned two of the most important things about prayer the monastic teachers have to teach. The first is that healing depends upon facing the very thing you find you absolutely cannot face, and doing the very thing you are most certain you cannot do. The second is that, because human beings are related to one another and to God through the image of God, being unable to use a particular name for God means casting off both the human relationship the name signifies, and parts of ourselves as well.

I decided, then, that I must go through a *limited* period in which I would deliberately call God Father in my daily prayer, and ask God to tell me what it meant to call God Father. I prepared to allow the most vulnerable parts of myself to enter into conversation with the one I would call by this name. I knew this was going to be painful and very risky. I had continued all these years to feel judged and rejected by the human father I still grieved for, and it seemed to me that my only chance of controlling the pain was to avoid him and try not to think about it.

As for my heavenly Father, what if I allowed the Father to see all my character flaws and weaknesses, and God responded by leaving me? I knew that the central Christian tradition had insisted that God is not male. At the same time, there has always been a strong voice within the tradition that has suggested that only men can truly be the image of God because they alone are male like God the Father and Jesus. What if God the Father were to tell me that this tradition within the tradition was right, and that I, as a woman, should accept myself as a second-rate human being? That I did not, therefore, belong in a leadership position in the church? In short, that the God I had gradually been getting to know and love was really a figment of my imagination? That God the Father was exactly who I had always feared? How was I going to be able to do such dangerous praying?

One reason I was able to take the risk was that I trusted my monastic teachers. My teachers in fact were called Abbas, or "fathers" by those who had learned from them in the ancient world. In their spiritual fatherhood they had deliberately modeled themselves on God in Christ, and they had been the source of so much gentleness, grace, and liberation for me. Could God the Father be so different from them?

I was also able to risk it because from the time I began my daily prayer, I had taken seriously Abba Poemen's advice to Abba John:

The nature of water is soft, that of stone is hard; but if a bottle is hung above the stone, allowing the water to fall drop by drop, it wears away the stone. So it is with the word of God; it is soft and our heart is hard, but the [one] who hears the word of God often, opens his [or her] heart to the fear of God.<sup>3</sup>

Scripture, particularly the psalms, was the very backbone of the prayer of the ancient monastics, and I had tried to model my own prayer on theirs. I could not call God Father. Yet, the hard rock of my fear was being worn down daily by hearing in my heart in scripture a whole set of names for God I had not been able to hear before: faithful one; shelter from the scorching heat, wings of a great bird, sider with the outcast against the powerful; mother, creator, quiet voice, light, love. I was beginning to understand how these names of nurture, life, and gentleness not only *modified* the meaning of the magisterial names of God, like almighty, king, warrior, and judge, but actually seemed to have turned their meaning upside down. Perhaps, I thought, scripture turns the meaning of the name "father" upside down as well.

But scripture had also already begun to wear away my heart in another way, too. Now I knew that, though

3. Poemen 183, *Sayings*, Ward, p. 192.

Jesus told us to call God "father," and though the language of "father" hurt me, Jesus is about the business of bringing life to people, not death. Jesus preaches the Kingdom, and he teaches us to pray for the coming of the Kingdom, for the time when our life together and with God will be characterized by its love, and by its freedom from all that keeps us from love. I knew that Jesus was my ally in my struggles, for Jesus does not preach knuckling under to the status quo on any issue. It was the Pharisees who did not like Jesus' healing on the Sabbath, or association with the undesirables, like tax collectors and women. It was Jesus who healed, and associated with the outcasts anyway, and who said continually and was saying to me now, "Be not afraid." Perhaps, I thought, the Father of Jesus may not, in fact, be a God who uses God's authority to demand obedience to the status quo.

So I began my experiment in calling God father. As is true in prayer, some of the insights I had came quickly, and some slowly, in fits and starts, and needed much unraveling over a very long time. It would not be useful to chronicle what came out of that prayer. I would, however, like to pass on three insights from that period that have been extremely helpful to me ever since.

The first of these insights came the day I read in the context of my morning prayer the familiar account of Jesus' conversation with the disciples in John 14. The

conversation recounted in this chapter of John takes place after Jesus' final meal with the disciples in which he has washed their feet. Now, he is trying to make them ready for what lies ahead by telling them that he is going to his Father to prepare a place for them. As is often true in the Gospels, the disciples do not understand what he is talking about. "What do you mean, 'prepare a place?'" they ask him. "How will we get there?" "Who is this father?" they ask anxiously, "and what is he like, anyway?" Jesus tells them not to worry. "If you know *me*, you will know my father, also. From now on you do know the [Father] and have *seen* him." "What do you mean?" Philip cries out. "Lord, *show* us the Father, and we will be satisfied." And Jesus answers, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen *me* has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father?'"

"Whoever has seen me *has seen* the Father!" I am an early church historian, and my speciality is in christology, and I have done a lot of work on trinitarian theology, as well, so what I am going to say now is really embarrassing to me. For years I had taught, according to the witness of the whole church through the ages, that Jesus is God among us, completely human and completely God. I had also taught that with respect to the Trinity, the Son is not subordinate to the Father, but fully equal to the Father. Together these two statements

clearly mean that if we want to know who God is, we can look to Jesus to find out. Now, I was realizing that, though I had believed this in my *head* and taught it, I had neither believed it in my heart nor understood in my heart the significance of the traditions I was teaching.

What I *had* believed in my heart—as opposed to my head, where I knew better—was what I imagine a lot of us believe, that Jesus was fully God among us when he showed forth the will of the Father in the great universal and symbolic acts of salvation history, from incarnation, through the crucifixion and resurrection, to his final coming. At the everyday, *ordinary* level, however, I was convinced, the human Jesus was not only *subordinate* to the Father; I *actually* thought in my heart that Jesus' rejection of the status quo, his friendship and support of women, and his refusal to be intimidated by religious authority told us nothing about God the Father at all. In other words, for those of you who have been to seminary and remember your church history, for all practical purposes, I had been one of the heretical Arians, who believed that the second person of the Trinity is subordinate to the first.

Now, for the first time, I could see the point of the orthodox insistence that the Son is not subordinate to the Father. I could understand in my heart and in my head what it means to say that if anyone sees Jesus that person *is* seeing the Father. It means, if the human Jesus

who is also God does not spend *his* time bossing around his friends, intimidating or demanding obedience from them, then the Father must not demand our unquestioning obedience, or wish to intimidate us, either. It means, if Jesus is not interested in drawing his disciples from among the religious hierarchy of his day, neither is the Father. It means, if Jesus' particular concern was for the healing and empowerment of the poor, the widows, those with loathsome social diseases, and the crooks, so was the Father's. It means, if in the Gospels Jesus' closest friends, Mary and Martha, are women, most certainly *God* the Father does not remotely value women the way my human father, the church, and the larger culture value women.

Indeed, if this is who God the Father is, I discovered, to name God Father in prayer is not to submit to a God who tells us as women to be respectful of the status quo. It is, rather, *to invoke God's fatherhood as a mighty corrective* against all the murderous images of *fallen* fatherhood that hold our hearts and persons, our churches and our world captive. This was my first insight.

Several months later, the second of these insights came to me. I was still pondering Jesus' saying "the one who has seen me has seen the Father" when John 11 turned up in the daily lectionary reading. Until this reading, which we know as the raising of Lazarus, I had heard John 11 as a statement of Jesus' mighty Lordship

over death. I had understood the chief character in the story to be Jesus, and the central event, Jesus' powerful summoning of the dead Lazarus from the tomb. Mary and Martha I understood to be secondary characters, whose passive weeping was there only for the contrast with the active Jesus.

The day of my insight, however, it struck me like a blinding light that the powerful Jesus who is God is not, in fact, the only major character in John 11. Rather, Mary and Martha have equal place in the story with Jesus. This is because the story is not so much about Lazarus being raised from the dead as it is about the way Jesus and his friends relate to one another.

You recall the story. It begins in Bethany when Mary and Martha call Jesus to come heal their brother Lazarus, who is dying. With uncharacteristic insensitivity, Jesus does not go until Lazarus has actually died and been in the tomb four days. When Jesus comes, Martha and Mary both confront him openly and even bitterly with their bewilderment and anger. "Where were you when we needed you?" they ask him. "Do you not know that Lazarus' death was completely unnecessary? How could you have betrayed us like this?" Jesus, on his part, does not threaten them for refusing to accept his will, nor does he accuse them of lack of faith. He answers them seriously. Only then, weeping in frustration on the

hold death still has on life, does Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead.

This time I heard the story in the context of my pondering on "whoever has seen me has seen the Father." Now, I recognized something else enormously significant I had believed about the meaning of God's fatherhood that I never before had known I believed. In my heart, I had been assuming that when Jesus told us to call God "Father" he had meant that as God's children we were to relate to that Father as *very little* children relate to the kind of benevolent, dominant parent who prefers toddlers to adolescents because toddlers are so sweet and adolescents are so complicated. My whole life had been spent trying to become an adult! I had always known in my heart that I needed to be an adult, and my instinct for self-preservation had been telling me that I could not afford to relate to a Father God who demanded that I live as a helpless child.

Now I could see that I had misunderstood all along. If it is true that "whoever has seen [Jesus] has seen the Father," it is important that in John 11 Jesus gives no sign that he expects Mary and Martha to relate to him as passive, obedient, little children. Martha and Mary are Jesus' *adult friends*. Because they love him, they are not submissive or subservient. They are not in the least afraid of him. They are not sullenly, silently angry with him. They do not accept what has happened as the will

of God. They tell him they are angry with him, and why. As for Jesus, Jesus does not simply tolerate these uppity women. He values them. He chooses them for his closest friends. He trusts them in their anger with him, and he trusts them with his life.

This moves me to my third, and perhaps most life-transforming insight from praying scripture, which is that God does not simply value our friendship. God actually chooses to need us. At the beginning of John 12 stands the story of the woman who poured perfume over Jesus' feet. In Mark, this woman is nameless, but in John it is the same Mary we have just met in the preceding chapter. The story begins with Jesus at table with the disciples during Easter week. Jesus is warning them of his coming death, and as usual, they are refusing to listen. Then, Mary comes in and pours the perfume over his feet. "How wasteful!" one of them says. "No," says Jesus. "She is preparing me for my burial." How abandoned Jesus must have felt in his disciples' refusal to listen to his warning about his upcoming death! How much Jesus needed Mary's affirmation of his own fear of death, which we see displayed so painfully in Gethsemane!

Why was Mary able to do this for Jesus? I believe it was because she had an adult friendship with Jesus. She had not backed away from him and obediently accepted her brother's death in chapter 11, but rather she had pushed Jesus and argued with him and held him ac-

countable. Now, as an adult, she was able to see the truth of Jesus' impending death and accept both his fear and her own grief and pain over her coming loss.

Eleven years ago my father's sister, whom I had not seen since childhood, moved to Atlanta, and we began to spend wonderful time together. Throughout my relationship with my ancient Christian teachers, they had been warning me that the work of prayer and healing is not only an internal mental process. It involves work and often major risk in the external world of relationships as well. In the midst of my pondering John 11, my aunt suggested that I go and visit my father, whom I had not seen for a number of years. I knew that he was remarried, that he was ill with emphysema, and that he was retired.

I was terrified by the idea of a visit. I also, however, remembered my monastic teachers' insistence that healing comes not by avoiding but by facing what we are most afraid of facing, and by now I truly trusted my teachers. In fear and trembling, therefore, I took a trip to Connecticut. It was not an easy trip, since I was still so afraid of him. I found, nevertheless, that my new insights about God and my relationship to God made it possible for me to begin to relate to my father not as a little child but as an adult.

And now, amazingly, being able to see him for the first time through adult eyes, I began to be able to see,

not my childhood image of my powerful, mythical father, but rather my actual, flesh and blood, real human father. In that trip, I began to learn that my father had changed over the years. He still had a formidable mind, but from somewhere and against all expectation, he himself had learned a great deal of gentleness. Just as surprising, considering his previous history, he had become a Christian to the core.

As I began to visit him regularly, hard as it was at first, knots began to untie within me, and parts of myself long gone started to return. I gave him everything I wrote in those last years, and he always was able to see to the heart of what I had written. I argued with him, for the first time in my life. He told me frequently that he was proud of me. I found that as I no longer needed God to take care of me as I had before, as a little child, so I no longer needed my father to take care of me.

I am not sure at what point I realized that the man whom I had seen as my all-powerful and invincible father not only wanted me as I am, but also needed me to stand by him through the long journey into his own death. My father needed my friendship. It still seems to me to be an astonishing gift of God's grace that in the last years of his life I was able to stand with him as his friend who was his adult child.

This story, like my life, is not yet over, but from where I stand in both I would make some final reflections.

First, I would suggest that none of us can really afford to say, "I cannot cope with my relationship either to my own father or to God the Father; therefore, I will simply set it all aside."

This does not mean, however, that I am offering a dogmatic defense of the use of "Father" language for God in public worship, but rather, it means that I am offering some suggestions for healing the wounds connected with fatherhood that so many of us carry around. Pastors especially have a responsibility to make sure that the language of worship does not hurt people or make God distant. I believe this means both that we must be extremely cautious in the use of Father language and that we must deliberately seek out and strengthen the use of other names and images of God for people who are suffering over "father" language. Some people will never be able to use father language without this language harming them.

At the same time, the work of learning to name God "father" is work that each of us must do in our private prayer. Public prayer may make the work easier or harder, but it will not take the place of our own personal wrestling with God, scripture, and our own hearts.

Second, in the context of this work of prayer, the tradition has, indeed, often been the carrier of fallen images of God's fatherhood. At the heart of the tradition, nevertheless, is the gospel, and the gospel presents an image of fatherhood that stands in judgment over any other image that destroys or belittles anybody, even if that image is conveyed by the tradition itself.

Third, I know now that Brother Smith was wrong all those years ago in the revivals at Pond Fork Baptist Church. We are each one of us infinitely precious to God the Father. God does not love me, or Brother Smith, *in spite of* who we are. God loves us as the very people we are. God has chosen to need us, and God longs for our adult friendship.

Finally, God's Fatherhood is not an invitation to have our needs met in exchange for becoming obedient or subservient little children. It is an invitation to stand with God as adult friends of God. It is also only as we can set aside our wounded images of God's fatherhood to accept this invitation to become adult friends of God that we are able to let our human fathers be our actual fathers, neither more nor less than who they really are.

My father is dead now, and I miss him very much. He died this past year on March 28, Holy Thursday, and his funeral was on Holy Saturday in a church already filled with white dogwoods for Easter. As I looked at my

father's casket in the front of the church that day, my heart was filled with gratitude for the gift of friendship God had given my father and me in my father's last years. On that Holy Saturday, I knew that the same God who had given that gift now had leaped into the fearsome darkness of death there to meet my father as friend, and to bring him safe into the joy of the Resurrection.

Praise be to the God who creates us and re-creates us, who shows us the meaning of fatherhood in Jesus, who calls us into friendship, and whose names are without number!

Praise be to the one God who speaks continually to our hearts, "Be not afraid!"