Jacob Stewart

‘Case Study C’

“I refuse to call God, “Father,’” declared Jeremiah. “Fran and I grew up with fathers who were horrible people. I fought with the man constantly, and Fran never really knew her father. He never really cared for her mother or supported her.” Fran added, “Jeremiah and I learned in school that the idea of God as Father is really part of the patriarchal influence upon Christianity in the form of dogmas, which we reject!”

These comments came in the context of a conversation you were having with the Shore family (Jeremiah, Fran, and their thirteen-year-old daughter Karin) over lunch after Sunday morning service. The Shore family wanted to have lunch with you to talk about a question Karin had been asking them repeatedly. Karin asked if she should address her prayers to “Jesus,” or to “the Spirit,” or to “Father-God,” as she had heard many people in the church do. Several people in the church, when they led the congregation in prayer, would say (sometimes in constant refrain) “God our Father,” or “Father-God,” or simply “Father.”

You continued to listen. “We told Karin that Jesus is love and that how we address God is really unimportant. What is important is that we know that God loves us,” stated Jeremiah. Karin still seemed quite confused, so they asked if you could talk with them about this after service next week. You agreed to meet with them. In the meantime, write out what you would say to them.

I’d like to thank each of you for agreeing to spend a bit more time with me here today. It means a lot that you’re willing to bring me into this conversation. Karin, it means a great deal to me that you're seriously wrestling with this difficult question of what to call God, especially in prayer. Fran and Jeremiah, I'm very proud of how you are raising your daughter to ask questions, think deeply, seek out answers, and process complex ideas. I'm also very proud of the way that you are approaching this as a family, investigating his topic of what we should call God. I can tell that each of you is thinking deeply about how what we call God matters and confronting how we name God has the potential to hurt us, and those around us, and to do real damage to our understanding of God. All these things are very good.

At several points during our Sunday liturgy, we refer to God as ‘father.’ Specifically in our service, we refer to God as ‘The Father’ during the Creed, The Lord's Prayer, and may use the term at many other times during our worship service when we pray. As you’ve noticed, when others offer petitions extemporaneously, they often use the term ‘Father-God’ several times without much thought. I’m excited to think seriously together about what we mean, as Christians, when we call God ‘Our Father.’ I want to commend you for taking this topic seriously because many people can use the term without thinking much about it, and you are right to see that as potentially dangerous.

Last week during our lunch, Fran mentioned that both of you learned that the idea of God as Father is part of the patriarchal influence upon Christianity in the form of dogmas. I’d like to understand a bit more about that. (…)[[1]](#endnote-1) Ok, so, I’d like to nuance that understanding a bit, to point out that calling God “Our Father” is not an invention of the later dogmatic church, that began to form in the 4th century,[[2]](#endnote-2) but is part of the more ancient practice of Christians. It’s something that we find in both Luke and Matthew’s gospel accounts, as a response to when the disciples ask Jesus how they should pray.[[3]](#endnote-3) Certainly that practice is codified by later dogmatic formulations of the church, but it didn’t begin in those later centuries but was part of Jesus’ teaching. So, we started to call God a father because that's what Jesus did and taught his followers to do. Before we can understand what it might mean for us to use the term, I thought it’d be important to try and figure out what Jesus ***didn’t*** mean by this teaching.

Let’s read Matthew 23:1-12 together.[[4]](#endnote-4) As you can see Jesus is trying to distance the idea of our concepts of human fathers or even human leaders from how God is a father or leader. I’m curious to hear your thoughts on this section of Jesus’ teaching. One other text that came to mind, when thinking about how Jesus in his ministry distanced the idea of earthly fatherhood is a little earlier in Matthew, let’s look at Matthew 7:7-11 together, I’d love to hear your ideas about it.[[5]](#endnote-5) I think it startling to see how Jesus is so aware that there are bad examples of fathers out there, calling even the ones who are decently good evil compared to the goodness of his father–strong words, huh?

One thing I think it’s important to add is that when Jesus taught his followers to pray starting with “Our Father” it would have been scandalous. For centuries the Jewish people had used other ways to refer to God, including the titles of Elohim, Adonai, or Yahweh, until the name of God was revealed to the Jewish people YHWH. This name for God was considered so holy that none would say it out loud, and many Jewish people today choose to use the word Hashem, which just means “the name.” So, worrying about what to call God and using the right term is a very old part of our faith. So, when Jesus referred to YHWH as his father, he was doing something radical.[[6]](#endnote-6) By using that name, he claimed to have a closeness to God that would have made Jewish believers very uncomfortable. But, of course, we also know that Jesus was God in human flesh, so for him to claim to be very close to God wasn’t a bad thing for him to do. Essentially Jesus is giving us a new way of naming God. He initiates a practice of naming God. [[7]](#endnote-7)But, in truth, it’s a quite old practice. The Hebrew Bible uses many, many ways to refer to God, which each highlights an aspect of his personality. There are many poetic ways that we refer to God–even referring to God as like a mother.

Each of the descriptions that we have for God is in some way incomplete, that’s one reason why there are so many names. [[8]](#endnote-8) At the end of the day, God is not able to be summed up in just one word or phrase. Our human language isn’t able to describe God in his entirety. However, I do want to stress that what Jesus did by referring to the Jewish God as a father would have been seen as a radical thing, and by inviting us to refer to him as ‘father’ he invites us into his radical action.

But the reality is that many of us have very complex, convoluted, destructive, and incredibly harmful relationships with our human fathers. We have been deeply hurt by them. Fathers have often failed to live up to the role that they were supposed to take on. Almost instinctually, we know that fathers should provide loving care and be there for their children as parents. Jeremiah, I know, even from just this conversation, that you are doing your best to be a good father for Karin, and to ensure she doesn’t have the experience that you and Fran had. I’d like to suggest that your desire to be good and loving parents is a good desire that God has placed in your hearts.

In Genesis, it says that when God created us, he created us “in his image.” One aspect of that is that as his children, every single person bears God’s image, just like how Karin looks a little like each of you and has a little bit of your personality. For Christian parents, one way we can bear God’s image is to imitate him by being good parents and showing the same generosity, care, and provision for our children that he shows for us.[[9]](#endnote-9) However, in this bitterly broken and backward world, human fathers often fall so very short of what it means to be a good parent It has lasting and painful effects for everyone involved.

But it’s very easy to imagine this happening exactly the other way around. That somehow, we call God ‘father’ because Christians imagine him to be something like our earthy fathers, who are part of the brokenness of this world and can be domineering or absent. Of course, there are a few big problems with this view. First of all, God the Father doesn’t have gender. Just like the Holy Spirit, he doesn’t have a body and isn’t male or female or even properly a woman or a man. But God is also not a force that we could properly call “it” either. Because of the limitation of language, traditionally the church has settled for using a masculine pronoun to describe the persons of God because we want to maintain the personhood of God and not confuse him with a force, like the wind. However, when we refer to the Trinity, we tend not to use any pronouns at all.

The process of naming God rightly is difficult if you are trying to be exact. Each one of the names and symbols for God we use is imperfect. For someone who has lived under oppressive political rule conceiving of God as a ruler or as a king might be painful. But what we learn from Jesus is that he desires to be king unlike any other earthy king–he’s a king who cares and loves his subjects. But you can imagine, even for someone who fully understands that it might still be too painful for them to consider God as any type of ruler because of their history.

Now, please don’t hear me trying to impose upon you a way of naming God. I can tell that it will be very important for you to move beyond connecting the idea of God with your painful experiences. I know that as parents you are doing your best to paint a picture of a good and gracious parent for your daughter. I’d like to suggest paying close attention to the Psalm we read each week and see if you can spot the other names for God that are present there. But even with all these names, it’s impossible for us to fully grasp who God is. It’s natural for us to impose our broken images of what our human fathers are like onto God. As Isaiah 45:15 says, “Truly, you are a God who hides himself, O God of Israel, the Savior.” But Jesus came into the world to show us the heart of God.[[10]](#endnote-10) Jesus came to show us his will toward us.[[11]](#endnote-11) And we know that Jesus came to demonstrate his love for us and connect us back to God. Startlingly, he states that if you have seen him, you've seen the father.[[12]](#endnote-12) Too often we imagine that there’s some other God, waiting behind Jesus, ready to get us, but as Christians, we confess that no secret God is hiding behind Jesus. [[13]](#endnote-13)

Recently, it has become popular to refer to the Trinity with names like The Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. These are good names because they accurately describe what the primary job of each one of the members of the Trinity is. However, for me, there is a distance inherent in these terms. For me, it’s a different thing to refer to God as my father than it is to refer to him as the creator. Each one of these terms, while accurate, creates some distance. Just like there's a big difference between referring to someone as a work colleague then as a friend. But, for some, they find these terms helpful precisely because they express with theological clarity the mission of each one of the persons of the Trinity, without using terms related to harmful fatherhood or patriarchal systems of oppression. And you are right to see patriarchy as a threat to understanding God rightly, it works to dismantle proper relationships of love and mutual care.

Overall, I think we are wrestling with some big topics today. Since Jesus enters into the process of naming God, he gives us the freedom to do the same. However, one opportunity we have as Christians by calling God ‘father’ is to cast a vision of what a father should be like. Also, for many Christians, the concept of God is comforting not just because he’s a much better father than their earthly father, but because he is really the only father that they've ever known. How might we be invited to challenge the brokenness of fatherhood, as we carry forth the image of God into this world?

Of course, simply using the term ‘father’ won’t be enough to do that. As you both know, it is very harmful to be a father in name only. But by losing the concept of God as “Our Father” is there the chance that we miss out on the opportunity to subvert the brokenness of fatherhood here on earth? Do we end up ceding the term to the brokenness of the world rather than recapturing the beauty of good fatherhood? Whatever term we end up using for God, I want you to know that what Jesus meant by teaching is to call God our Father is to demonstrate his closeness, his provision, his desire to provide you with an inheritance, to claim you as one of his children, his gracious will for you, his love, and his desire to give you good gifts.[[14]](#endnote-14)

1. I’m hoping here to garner more information about the meaning of their statement at Lunch last week. My impulse is to understand more about what they meant. However, I’m continuing under the assumption that the elaboration didn’t provide much more nuance than what was originally gathered from the case study description. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. I want to recognize that the assertion that the fatherhood of YHWH is a consequence of later historical innovation by the dogmatic church isn’t fully accurate as a matter of historical fact. Calling God Father is part of the earliest manuscripts of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Matthew 6:9–13 & Luke 11:2–4, here can be found the biblical sources of the Lord’s Prayer. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Matthew 23:1-12, I want to utilize this text to show that Jesus is aware of the desire for harmful and oppressive forms of familial leadership. Ultimately, he distances the idea of the fatherhood of God from the earthly fathers that we have.

   *Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, ‘The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practise what they teach.****4****They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. They love to have the place of honour at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues,* *and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, and to have people call them rabbi.* *But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven.* *Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant.* *All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.*  [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Matthew 7:9-11, I want to use this text to further underscore the point above.

   *Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone?**Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!* [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Soulen, “Who Shall I Say Sent Me.” Page 13. I am using Soulen’s argument to ground the naming of the persons of the Trinity in the original Jewish naming of God. One of Soulen’s contentions is that as Christians we should work to recapture the tetragrammaton. She states that the lack of a actual name for any other than the second person of the trinity is a problem. I hope to use this to start my understanding of naming, with this as the patterm of naming God within it’s ancient Jewish context. I also hope to lean into my explanation of the trinity on Soulen’s definition of the various patters of mission for the persons of the trinity. I also aim to point this out to show the development and revelation of God’s name, which is revealed through historical process, given to us in the books of Genesis and Exodus and extending to us today. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Taken from a lecture and notes from Willie James Jennings. This is something mentioned in the lectures on “The Creature Naming God”, I want to agree with his paradigm of the practice of naming, which substantiates our own naming of God. This I hope gives us freedom to name God, but which is grounded in the practice of naming established by Jesus. This is especially important for me to establish this within the context of a tradition which we enter into, which has a history and context and isn’t totally free from precedence established by Jesus. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Johnson, “Trinity; The Living God of Love” Page 214. I am attempting to use Johnson’s insistence of the Trinity’s incomprehensibility. I hope to further expand and utilize Johnson’s insistence that the trinity should be rooted in the plan for salvation. I think Johnson’s proposal of this way of understanding the trinity as related to salvation is a more natural and compelling way to understand the activity and mission of the trinity. I want to pay special attention to the way that the Father has shown us himself by the sending of the Son, which I pick up again a little later. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Baker-Fletcher, “Dancing with God: The Trinity from a Womanist Perspective” Page 73. I’m using Fletcher’s concept of God’s parental care and provision, and really connecting that to the in class lecture on the providence of God throughout the discussion. That what God provides is necessarily good is central to my whole argument. Ultimately this is where I hope to end up.I borrow heavily form the section on Creation and Providence. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. John 17:25-26, I want to insist that Jesus came to put on display the Father’s love.

    *Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you, and these know that you have sent me.* *I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them and I in them.* [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. John 6:38, Jesus will is united with the Father’s.

    *For I have come down from heaven not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me.* [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. John 14:8-17 When you’ve seen Jesus you’ve seen the Father.

    *Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” Jesus said to him, “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’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it. “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.* [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. I’ve borrowed here from my notes on the lectures related to the Incantation in class. We had a section there about how Jesus shows us the Father, which collapses our understanding of the immanent trinity into the revelation of economic trinity. Trying to get them to see Jesus as the way to envision the Father. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. This is taken from the lecture about Trusting God, in class. Willie James Jennings noted that *“What’s at stake in the doctrine of God’s providence is the narrative integrity of our lives.”* [↑](#endnote-ref-14)