

Sermon, May 26, 2024
Romans 8: 12-17

“Cry, Abba Father”

Who is, or what is God? By what name is he to be called? The fact is, there are many - both names and titles - that point to his possible identity. In the Hebrew scripture he is called Yahweh, Elohim, and El Shaddai. He is referred to as Lord, the Almighty, as well as Creator, the Unmoved Mover. Paul Tillich called him the Ground of Being, Karl Barth, the Wholly Other. Arabic Christians call him Allah, for the simple reason that Allah is the Arabic word for God. I tend to think of him as a Benevolent Consciousness that permeates the Cosmos. Now, I have repeatedly used the pronoun ‘him’, which rises out of the fact that “Christianity, from a very early time in its history, had been patriarchal. That is, it had systematically supported the subordination and exploitation of women”, but it would be perfectly appropriate to refer to God as ‘her’, for God is Spirit, and Spirit is without gender. Of course, all of these names and titles are mere symbols to identify and describe the One who exists far beyond the limits of human comprehension.

God has been portrayed as great liberator, leading his people out of the bondage of slavery, or as one who is angry and judgmental sending plagues upon the Israelite’s enemies, or a great flood upon the whole of the earth, animals, and humanity. But then , again, he is seen as the gentle shepherd who leads us towards still waters, or who sends out prophets to cry out for the rights of the poor and downtrodden.

He has been called good, as well as being synonymous with love. But he has also been used as justification for great evil. In our own society he was portrayed as giving his blessing on the institution of slavery or insisting on either the annihilation of Native Americans or converting them at gun point. In Nazi Germany commandants of concentration camps were known to go about their hideous work against Jews, then going to the local church to worship and pray.

But this morning our focus is on who Jesus saw him as, and what he called him. In our reading we come to a word that appears three times in the New Testament. It’s an Aramaic word - which is the language that Jesus spoke. The word is ‘Abba’, which translates as Father, but more specifically like ‘Papa’ or ‘Daddy’. It is a word that reveals the tender or intimate relationship that Jesus experienced with the Lord, the Lord who called Jesus his Beloved Son, and it is out of that word that we come to understand Jesus’ understanding of God.

In some ways the image of God was modeled on the human understanding of monarchy - that God is seen as King. But “in the New Testament Jesus is never depicted as addressing God as King, and there is no evidence that he spoke about God in that way”. In the course of history God has been called omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent, but those are not biblical terms. They arose out of Ancient Greek philosophy. As all knowing, all seeing, and all-powerful God has been portrayed as controlling all things, but “It was unconditional love rather than controlling power that dominated Jesus’ understanding of God”. As a Jew, Jesus saw God as good and calling all people to be good as well.

Returning to God’s calling Jesus as his Beloved Son , as well as this morning’s reading, we find that God has other beloved sons and daughters. As Paul writes, “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God”. Just as Jesus can be seen as God’s only begotten Son, all who look to God in faith become God’s adopted sons and daughters.

Jesus’ perception of God was not of the one who led the Israelites into the Promised Land and ordered them to slaughter all the Canaanites who already occupied the land. His was more akin to prophets such as Isaiah, Amos, and Hosea, who called out for Justice, giving hope to the poor, the destitute, and the victims of persecution and oppression. God is not to be seen as an all-powerful king dealing out both thunderbolts and blessings, i.e., punishment and reward, but, as theologian John Cobb, Jr. insists, “that the dominate biblical view of God’s working in the world is that he works in and through natural things and especially in and through human beings”. This is particularly made real through us, God’s adopted children.

We cannot see God with our eyes, or hear him with our ears., but we can come to grasp the essential nature of God as we look to our brother Jesus Christ who embodies God’s love, mercy, and compassion. And just as the reality of God is revealed through the incarnated flesh of Jesus, it can also be found in us when we open our hearts to the infilling of the divine Spirit. And when we do so we can also come to know the intimate relationship that Jesus knew awakening in us the right and the blessing to call God, Abba? Amen.

Let us Pray: Dearest Abba, Creator, Father and Mother of us all, it is our desire to know you better, and we know that it is your desire to be better known. We look to your Son Jesus as a true revelation of the love that you are, and we also look to him as a model of how we might be more faithful to you. May your Holy Spirit be our inspiration and our guide. We open our hearts, our minds, and our spirits to you, knowing that we too are your children - children who want to be faithful to your will in all things.

On this Memorial Day weekend, we also remember those who gave their lives in service to their country, and we celebrate the freedoms born of their sacrifice. We continue, as always, to pray for peace so that more lives may not be lost on battlefields around the globe. We continue to pray for the people of Ukraine, for an end to the bloodshed in the Israel/ Gaza conflict, as well as for peace in Sudan and Haiti...Amen.