

For the longest time, the hardest part of praying, for me, was getting started. I had a stumbling block: how do you begin a conversation with God? How do you address God? You see, I had grown up with a very high view of God. This high view of God, however good, made it difficult to approach and ‘talk’ to God. While I might have been taught that God was all around and nearby, I was also taught great reverence for God, which then made it tough to talk to God. I felt like I had to talk to God in a particular way, with particular words. How I thought of God shaped both my relationship with and how I talked to God. My high view of God made God just about unapproachable, for fear of getting it wrong.

Consciously or unconsciously, we each carry within us an image of God. It’s how we think of God; it’s what comes to mind when we’re asked to picture God. And even if there isn’t a particular picture, we are likely to name qualities and characteristics. It’s these mental pictures, these qualities and characteristics, that I’m talking about today when I speak of images of God. And these images of God, I believe, shape our relationship with God. It shapes how we approach God, it shapes how we think about God, it shapes how we understand God at work in our lives and in the world.

Perhaps one of the most common images of God is that of a Father. It’s no coincidence that we’re talking about this today. This image of a fathering God is derived directly from Jesus’ own words. Jesus often speaks of God as ‘the Father.’ Whether Jesus is referring to God as Father because that is his particular relationship with God, or whether he is offering us an image to use when speaking of God, it’s uncertain. The nuance of this has likely been lost in translation from the Aramaic to the Greek, to Contemporary modern-day English.

For many, there is a confidence in speaking about and to God as Father because Jesus did it, and, as we’re called to follow and emulate Jesus, it would make sense to use some of Jesus’ own familial language. I often hear people, when praying, address God as Father God. It’s not just in informal prayers, we regularly the Lord’s Prayer which begins with, ‘Our Father.’ Formally, this is the prayer that Christ taught his followers. And the church has done little to change this prayer.

For many, the image of a fathering God is comforting and reassuring. God as father might feel as good and warm, and secure as a hug from your father. God as father might bring with it the reassurance you felt as a child, trusting that everything is going to be OK. Perhaps imaging God

as father reminds us of a steady love that we experienced from our respective fathers; or maybe, it evokes the image of someone that we can always count on to help us out when we're in trouble; in a bind; or just don't know what to do, home renovations are an instance when I lean heavily onto my father for this one. And for those of us who have had positive father figures in our lives, this is a very accessible image to draw on.

However, this isn't the case for everyone.

For some the image of God as a father figure can be painful. Perhaps they've experienced abuse at the hands of a father, or someone who was like a father to them. Perhaps their relationship with their father is strained or estranged. Or perhaps, their father was more cold and distant, and didn't radiate the love of God that we hear preached about, and so it's hard to square the circle. Or maybe one's father was simply very strict, judicial, or authoritarian, and they have a hard time engaging with God, who may share the same qualities. And there are likely other reasons. In these cases, I can imagine, understand, and appreciate that it's difficult to imagine God as a father.

What's curious is that the image of God as father didn't emerge until Jesus. Before Jesus, God was known by a few names in Jewish Scriptures. Seven distinct names are attributed to God; they include YHWH, which is the most common name of God; Adonai, meaning Lord; El, meaning God; Elohim, meaning God in the plural sense; Shaddai, meaning Almighty; Tze-va-ot, meaning Hosts, and Ehyeh, which is I am.

These names are, in fact, so holy that once written, they cannot be erased or destroyed. And curiously enough, some of these names speak of God in the plural sense, not just in the singular sense. Make of that what you will.

These names for God would be what Jesus grew up with, but sometime during his ministry, Jesus introduced us to a more familial way of addressing and consequently imagining God. Jesus begins to talk about God as Father, and goes so far as to use the endearing term, *Abba*. Scholars would be quick to note that this term is not just for little children; rather, it's used by children of all ages to address their father. *Abba* is Aramaic, and the best translation to English would be Papa; something I'm all too familiar with hearing. But God is addressed by and known by many other images in scripture.

Setting the image of God as Father aside, what are some other images we could use? The name that God claims, and uses with Moses in the burning bush story, is best translated as “I Am.” God is the great I am. God is. That’s God’s name.

And I believe that permits us to imagine God in a variety of ways. I believe it gives us permission to imagine and wonder. In some respect, we can finish the sentence, “God is...”

God can be breath and air, and life, like we talked about last week. God can be a burning bush. God can be a voice, a presence. God is the creator, and God is refuge and strength. God is the rock, and can also be a cleft in the rock for shelter. God can be sheer silence. God can be... again, you finish the sentence.

And how we finish that sentence shapes what our relationship with the divine will be like. So, for example. If we see God as creator, one might imagine God’s hands in everything, there is a spark of life in everything, which is a piece of God.

A friend of mine is a biologist and a geneticist. For her, God is a creator, and each time she looks through a microscope, each time she dissects a specimen, each time she studies one of the many creatures that inhabit this planet, she sees reflections of God. She delights in seeing the diversity, the variety, and the creativity of God.

I’ve often thought of God as a creator. Several years ago I started to build furniture. I built my desk at home as well as the entertainment unit in our basement. They look passable, but on closer inspection, there are flaws. The desk that I made cracked in half because the wood wasn’t completely dry when I started working with it, and as it adjusted to the dry Saskatchewan air, it split. The entertainment unit isn’t perfect; the drawer handle is crooked, that’s what you get from eyeballing it, the wood is a bit warped from sitting unevenly on lumber in my basement, and some of the veneer isn’t quite even. They’re not going to win awards, but I love them, and I am proud of my creations. No matter their flaws, I made them and they’re mine. And I like to imagine it’s the same way with God. God is proud of each one of God’s creations, us included, no matter the flaws.

On the flip side, if we imagine God as an authority figure, delight might not be a word that would come up that often. Instead, I would imagine that for those who imagine God in this way, rules and structure are important. Perhaps order is an aspect of God that is treasured. In a chaotic world, maybe it’s comforting to know that God has ultimate control over. That amid the present upheaval that God can and will act to bring order.

I spoke earlier of having a high view of God, along with that high view came a strict image of God too. God wanted me to be good. And that came with a lot of rules to follow. And for a young child, that worked. I was very much a rule follower. I didn't want to get into trouble, least of all trouble with God. This changed in time.

Alongside this image of God, God for me was also masculine. And so for quite some time, God as father fit for me, and I could imagine God as my father. Stern, kind, gentle and strict. But as I grew and as I learned more about God and explored my faith and my relationship with God further, I began to form another image of God.

The image of God that we carry has, in my experience, been the stumbling block in our relationship with God. I remember one instance with a young man I was listening to. He was going through his third divorce, his relationship with his parents was rocky, his relationship with his kids was distant, and his relationship with the church was irregular at best, and yet he wanted to talk with me. At one point, I asked him, "How do you imagine God?" And as he described his image of God, I could see how it played into every aspect of his life. I then asked him, if you could imagine God differently, what might God look like? And as he talked and brainstormed, I could see life in his eyes. Sometimes we need to change our image of God. And perhaps this is our challenge.

At a pivotal point in my faith journey, I needed to form a new image of God. God became for me a nature guide, a canoe guide, if you will.

This image developed over time, but came into it's own in the wilderness. With God as a guide, God is leading. God knows the way, God knows where the path is, and if we stray from the path, that's OK, because God knows how to get back to the path. And, at the same time, God can be just as curious as I can be, and so sometimes we stray from the path on purpose to explore. Whether the path be swampy, or through muskeg, with the path be rocky, sandy, full of roots, or smooth and clear, God knows the terrain.

God, like I mentioned, is playfully curious. God, for me, will not hesitate to stop to notice, and to look, and to draw my attention to the interesting or neat thing along the way, whether it's a rock formation, or a pictograph, a foot print, a millipede, a peculiar plant, the movement of the water, wind. God notices, God is fully engaged, and fully present. God delights in the beauty of God's creation, and wants us to fall in love and delight in it the same way that God does, and so God leads us to these moments, these times, these experiences.

This image of God, as a guide, for me, has opened up my relationship with God. God feels closer, God, while still having authority, as guides do, wields that authority gently. God has wisdom, and it's wisdom to be shared. And, perhaps most important to me, God is joy-filled and delights. This has shaped my prayer life; no longer do I have to worry about saying the right things, addressing God the correct way. There's room to be playful, curious, and relaxed.

How we imagine God shapes our relationship with God, and I would suggest the world. I've tried to present a few options for how one might imagine God. And there is no one correct way, as well there is no incorrect way. Our images are just that, our images of God; it's how we imagine and relate to God. Because God is I am, God is, God can be all these and more, and none of these at the same time.

God as Father is the most popular, it is the most familiar, and it's an image that the church has long held and embraced. And at the same time, for some, it's problematic. As with any image of God, there are always limitations, every metaphor breaks down at some point, every example falls short and doesn't apply at some time, and because God is, because God is I am, there's always another way to approach and engage with God.

So while we recognize Father's Day today, and we recognize God as Father, or at the very least, God possessing father-like qualities, we also recognize God in many other ways. God has been revealed to humankind in many different ways at many different times. No one image is more correct than another, because at the end of the day, God is.

Amen