

Every morning in seminary there was an ecumenical worship service.

Each day it was led by a different student group:

the Methodists, Catholics, Lutherans, or Evangelicals, to name a few.

Also,

each day's service was a different style or type of liturgy;

one morning would be sung prayer,

another day it was more meditative.

There would be straight prayer book,

or perhaps the Gospel choir would sing.

Sometimes there was preaching, and on Fridays there always a community eucharist.

Even with all these different possibilities,

some things remained the same;

there were rules and guidelines regarding the use of language.

For example,

whenever music was sung, or prayers or Holy Scripture were read,

it was forbidden to refer to God as "Lord" or "Master."

Some people in charge of worship at Yale believed that such terms would conjure up feelings or images stemming from the practice of slavery.

One was also discouraged from reading or saying the word "darkness" in relation to evil, because such language was said to have racist overtones.

And finally,

what was probably the most frowned upon,

was referring to God as Father.

Gendered language was viewed as oppressive, misogynistic,

and could be a source of pain for people who had painful experiences with their earthly fathers.

For example,

when someone prayed the Lord's prayer,

they would begin,

Our "Creator," which art in heaven...

I mention this because of our readings for this week.

In the Epistle to the Thessalonians, St. Paul tells the church

That he "dealt with the Thessalonians like a father with his children."

But,

In St. Matthew's gospel we hear Jesus telling his disciples that they are not to call anyone Father, except for God alone.

On the surface it appears that these readings are in conflict with one another.

But upon a deeper examination,

it seems like they in fact are not.

Rather,

they provide examples of the two different ways that spiritual fathers may act.

Let's start by looking at our gospel reading.

Jesus accuses the religious leaders of the day,

the pharisees,

of putting a tremendous emphasis on believing those teachings that they hold to be authoritative. Not out of concern for the souls of the people, but rather to be recognized and to be held in high regard. Also, the Pharisees were in the habit of practicing the ol', "do as I say, not at as I do!" message.

They weren't concerned with following the rules and regulations they set down. They wanted their followers to adhere to their teachings and authority, though, and not because it would help them have better relationships with God, but because it would give great glory to the pharisees to see the control they had over other people.

The pharisees were like the father that pushes his child to be the best baseball player, or the the top student, or the prettiest girl.

And I'm not talking about the father who, out of love, pushes his child to have discipline and work hard, so that she can excel and have a happy and productive life.

That's being a great dad.

No. I'm talking about the dad who likes how it feels to have power over a smaller, less powerful person.

I am sure we all know examples of parents that are trying to live vicariously through their kids!

For these types of fathers,

or parents,

what is most important is that they look good, and that their neighbors, friends, and coworkers, think they are awesome because of how their kids do in life.

These fathers,

they don't care how their kids feel about the different areas of their lives; just as long as when they go to church, or the company picnic, they can brag about the accomplishments of their children, as if they were the ones who achieved them.

Jesus tells His disciples,

these are the ones that should not be called fathers!

Jesus believed that the pharisees were only concerned with looking good, and not with the well-being of their followers.

The pharisees would demand that their disciples would call them by lofty titles, of dignity,

respect,

and authority.

Have you ever met someone who has corrected you when you didn't call them Dr. or Professor?

There are people in this world who find their worth in titles, and in being in places of high regard.

This also brings me to say something about calling a priest "father."

I have some very protestant friends that use this scripture to say we shouldn't call priests fathers.

The problem with this is,  
it is taking the verse out of context,  
and missing the point that we just examined.  
If one were to read this literally,  
then we should never call anyone teacher,  
or our earthly fathers,  
father.

In other passages,

Jesus seems to have no problem with titles.

This passage is not a prohibition of calling a priest "father."

It is a prohibition against leaders who are more concerned with titles,  
than with actually being careful teachers, loving leaders, and doers of the Word of God.

The other example we see in our readings today,  
shows St. Paul admonishing the believers at Thessalonica,  
that he did those things that a good father does.

The message translation puts it this way,

"With each of you we were like a father,  
with his child,

holding your hand,

whispering encouragement,

showing you step-by-step how to live well before God."

The good father or parent,

helps their kids reach their potential so that they can succeed in life.

They push them to do their homework so they can gain knowledge.

They encourage them to go to church so that they might know Jesus,  
and worship Almighty God.

They pray with them,

read the bible together,

and talk about faith.

This is who St. Paul says the good father is.

They are more concerned with the well-being and soul of their children,  
than with outward accomplishments.

Ever since I have arrived several people have asked me "what should we call you?"

I tell them they can call me whatever they want...

that being said,

if someone feels so compelled to call me father,

I will find it truly humbling and an honor.

One final point I would like to make.

In reference to those whose concern is calling Father might conjure up bad feelings because of  
problematic relationships with their earthly dads.

I truly believe that this is all the more reason we should call God Father.

What better thing than to acknowledge God as the true father,

the perfect father.

The father who has given all to us so that we might be saved,  
and in relationship with Him.

He is the dad that can never stop hugging us,  
kissing us,

playing catch with us,  
and telling us he is proud of us,  
and who still loves us,  
even when we screw up.

If you are here today and have had difficulties with your father;  
don't forget that your father in heaven loves you more than anything,  
and that He delights in you.

He is the perfect dad.

Amen.