

The God You Never Knew Before

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Romans 5:1-8

In his book, *Disappointment with God*, Philip Yancey tells of rummaging through some old photos during a visit with his mom. He was surprised to find a faded, dog-eared photo of himself at 8-months-of-age that he had not seen before. He asked his mother, widowed when Yancey was an infant, to explain the significance of the photo.

It seems Yancey's father spent the final months of his life in an iron lung, a cumbersome breathing apparatus that encased him like a tomb. Due to the severity of the father's illness, his two little boys rarely got to visit. So Mrs. Yancey taped photos of herself and the boys just above her husband's head on the imposing metal cylinder. There Yancey's father, unable to move, spent the last four months of his life looking at the faces of those he held dearest in the world.

Later, Yancey would write, "I have often thought of that crumpled photo, for it is one of the few links connecting me to the stranger who was my father: someone I have no memory of, no sensory knowledge of, spent all day, every day thinking of me, devoting himself to me, loving me . . ."

"The emotions I felt when my mother showed me the crumpled photo were the very same emotions I felt that February night in a college dorm room when I first believed in a God of love.

Someone is there, I realized. Someone is there who loves me. It was a startling feeling of wild hope, a feeling so new and overwhelming that it seemed fully worth risking my life on."

The good news of Jesus proclaims that we all have such a benefactor, such a partisan, such a parent whose face is ever turned toward us in unabashed, adoring love. That someone is the God we never knew before, the one Jesus called *Abba*, drawing on the soft, baby sounds of a toddler's word for one's father: "Papa."

God, says Jesus, is like the world's best mother and father rolled into one wondrous, healing embrace of holy love. And from the time you drew your first breath, and even before that, this loving *Abba* has known and delighted in you. Like a grandparent smiling and tearing up at Facebook photos of the grandkids from afar, or Yancey's father caring, loving, and remembering with each agonizing breath, God has always been there, silently treasuring you.

Then one day, the God you never knew before stepped out of hiding. And in a wild, risky bid, got intimately involved with us and our world in a flesh and blood encounter with God's son, our Lord, Jesus Christ.

And when a blind, flailing humanity, struck out at God's aching, seeking love, and strung Jesus up to die, even that could not defeat God's resolute love for you. Rather, at the right time, "Christ died for the ungodly as God proved God's love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:6, 8). This is the shocking, liberating truth at the heart of the gospel: "Not that we loved God, but that God loved us and gave God's son as an atoning sacrifice for our sin" (1 John 4:10). For the cross marks the spot, forever after, where the depths of our sin and need are met not by an avenging wrath, but an atoning love, a love ever willing to pay the cost of loving us, no matter what we do to stymie or defeat it.

Years ago, my father, now deceased, called me on my birthday. "I remember that day," he mused aloud.

"Really?" I answered. "What do you remember?"

“I remember you were the ugliest baby I had ever seen. In the background, I heard my mother gasp and exclaim, “Oh, Bob, that’s not true!”

“It *is* true,” my father shot back. “He was the most wrinkled and ugly baby I had ever seen.”

That’s how I grew up: caught between my father’s forthrightness and my mother’s soft, protective love.

But the beauty of the story, at least to me, is that my father loved me, even at my wrinkled and ugliest worst. Later, my father loved me, even when I tested his patience during the terrible twos. My father loved me, even when I was a haughty, know-it-all adolescent. And my father loved me, even when I disappointed his expectations. For at its best, my father’s love was based not in who *I* was but in who *he* was.

Sadly, not everyone is so blessed. So not everyone resonates with the language, precious to me, of God as a gracious, Heavenly Father. But whether you call God Mama or Papa or *Abba* or some moniker of your own making, the world-altering truth of the gospel is that at the right time, while we were weak, while we were enemies, while we were still sinners God proved God’s love when Christ died for us (Rom. 5:6, 8, 10).

And please note: the emphasis here is on the love of *God*. “*God* proves God’s love for us” . . . “*God* so loved the world . . .” For whatever happened on that cross, it happened as God and Jesus held hands before plummeting together into the darkness of our sin and death and then emerged with a life and love that no power on heaven or on earth can compromise or quench or quell.

This week, some distant relations in my extended family gathered for a family reunion out in Phoenix: they call it the Southern Baptist Convention. At that meeting, Southern Baptists finally yielded to the advocacy of a prominent black pastor and condemned the alt-right (alternative right), white supremacy hate speech that fuels so much vitriol and violence in our society.

Not a day later, shots rang out on a baseball field in northern Virginia where some republican lawmakers were practicing for a charity baseball game. This time the hate and violence erupted from the left side of the political divide that has created such a chasm in our country.

With you, I continue to pray for Rep. Steve Scalise, Matt Mika, and the others wounded in this savage, senseless attack. And I pray that God will use this tragedy to turn us from attacking our opponents to treating with respect and restraint those fellow Americans with whom we disagree.

But along with the Southern Baptist Convention's laudable action of condemning alt-right hate speech, I was disturbed by a less newsworthy action at this week's meeting. And that was to enshrine as absolute orthodoxy one, and only one, view of the cross, namely, the "penal substitution" theory of the atonement. According to this teaching, Christ died on the cross to placate the wrath of an irate God, much like an older brother taking a beating from an abusive, alcoholic father to deflect harm from his younger, more vulnerable siblings.

Granted, there are some biblical passages that can be twisted and misread in this way, but the dominant note in the New Testament is not that God needs to be reconciled to us but that we need to be reconciled to God. Or as Jesus taught in his most memorable parable, God is not an offended judge who must be appeased; God is a loving, compassionate father who can hardly wait to welcome his prodigal sons and daughters home.

And far from insisting on one view of the cross, and a gross and distorted view at that, the New Testament offers a slew of metaphors to probe the mystery of the cross. *Justification*: being treated as beloved, even when we're not very lovable. *Reconciliation*: vaporizing our suspicion toward and distance from God in an overwhelming experience of love and welcome. *Sacrifice*: God's stopping at nothing to shower the world with an anguished, forgiving love. *Ransom and Redemption*: God's willingness to pay any cost to set you free from bondage to sin and death.

As the twentieth century theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, captured the essence of the cross in a captivating line, “Christ’s death did not make grace possible. Christ’s death made God’s grace visible . . . so all the world could see.”

Maybe this is the God you never knew before: not a God who waits until you are your picture perfect self to accept you; not a God who had to beat the hell out of somebody else in order to love you. But the God who loves you at your absolute worst. The God who loves even your most wrinkled and ugliest self. The God who holds you precious, not first because of *who you are* but because of *who God is*. “And God proves God’s great love for us in that *while we were yet sinners*, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8).

I know. It’s a big truth to swallow, and a big, surprising, unsettling love to trust. That’s why we’re not left to pull this off alone. Rather, as Paul exults in Romans 5, “God’s love has been *poured* into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (5:5). In other words, it’s not just God’s *grace* that is the gift; even the *faith to trust God’s grace* is a gift as God *pours* the experience of divine acceptance into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.

As Austin Farrar describes this miraculous moment, “It is not Jesus knocking at the (heart’s) door that secures his admittance; it is the God within (pulling back) the bolts with invisible fingers. When your pride, when your self-sufficiency has been shattered, the Spirit will secure the admittance of all the truth you need to know.”

And once the experience of God’s unmerited grace for us in Jesus Christ seeps down deep and starts setting us free, we become a people of grace ourselves. The God you never knew before takes the power of Christ’s cross, from long ago and far away, and meets you at the point of your own deepest weakness and need, until you actually begin to believe--in fits and starts, yes, but with forward movement--that you are beloved and accepted by God, no matter what you do or don’t do. “Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord

Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace *in which we stand*" (Rom. 5:1); not sit or hide or shrink or cower, mind you, but *take our stand* in God's daring, accepting grace.

In addition to the violent attack in Alexandria, this week also marked the one-year anniversary of the tragic shooting at the Pulse Nightclub in Orlando. That brazen, hate-filled bloodbath took the lives of 49 mostly LGBTQ persons. Orlando and the entire country were shaken by this carnage and left wondering, "How could this happen?"

One answer came in the documentary some of us watched in Sunday School this morning. Called "Love the Sinner," the film was produced by Jessica Devaney, a lesbian woman with ties to our community. Diane Lipsett knew Jessica as a student at the Divinity School, and she later graduated from Wake with a masters in religion.

In seeking to live a full, free life as a gay woman, Jessica long ago cut ties with the church, a community she found condemning and unaccepting. But after the Orlando massacre, she felt the need to re-engage her old faith family, asking some hard questions and speaking some hard truths.

One of those was to expose the rank hypocrisy in the cliché, "Hate the sin but love the sinner." Such an attitude leaves the one offering such supposed comfort in the exalted position of getting to decide who is in and who is out, who is right and who is wrong, when as partisans of God's grace in Jesus Christ, we all stand together on level ground at the foot of the cross.

As Jessica asks one Orlando megachurch pastor featured in her film, "(The question is not whether *I* feel welcome at your church. (The question is) whether the *one I love* feels welcome at your church."

Our own church's commitment to "grace unbounded"--our own church's unabashed welcome to our gay, lesbian, and transgendered family members and friends, or in some cases, our gay, lesbian, or transgendered selves--is based not in our eagerness to pass some liberal political or theological litmus test. No, this unqualified acceptance is based in the realization that

we cannot bask in God's gracious, accepting love for us, just as we are, without expressing that same love to others.

And not because we're a cut above other Christians or better than anybody else. But because as God's great love *pours* into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, we have no choice. That kind of love cannot be contained. Inevitably, it spills out to embrace and welcome others.

No, the God you never knew before is not the sentimental God of popular piety, the angry God of a harsh fundamentalism, or the touchy-feely God of new age spirituality.

The God you never knew before is the God of a costly, consuming love made incarnate in Jesus Christ, a love that flowed freely at the cross and was vindicated at the empty tomb. This is a God-breathed, Jesus-soaked love that reaches and transforms everything it touches, starting with me, and starting with you.

God, our gracious "Abba," our Heavenly Mama/Papa, forgive us when we forget this miracle in which we stand: the miracle of your reckless, relentless grace that will not let us go. Rather, so pour your love into our hearts that we become unwitting channels of your grace to others, and indeed, all the world. In Jesus' name we pray and hope to live. Amen.

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