Abba! Father!
Romans 8:14–17

The Beginning of Father's Day — and the Methodist Connection

Today is Father's Day. Did you know that just like Mother's Day, Father's Day also began in a Methodist church? The very first Father's Day service was held on July 5, 1908, at Williams Memorial Methodist Episcopal Church South in Fairmont, West Virginia. It was led by Grace Golden Clayton, a Methodist woman who wanted to honor the fathers who had died in a tragic coal mining explosion that had taken 361 lives—many of them fathers—just a few months earlier. Grace asked her pastor to hold a special service in remembrance—not just for those lost in the disaster, but also to give thanks for the everyday love and labor of fathers. Although it didn't become a national holiday right away, this quiet beginning in a Methodist sanctuary planted the seeds.

So yes—Father's Day began with grief and gratitude, with prayer and remembrance, right inside a Methodist church. It wasn't about grilling steaks or buying ties. It was about recognizing the quiet strength, steady tenderness, and faithful love of fathers—and lifting them up to God.
I know the word "father" doesn't sound the same to all of us. For some, it brings warmth—a man who was kind, gentle, and always on your side. For others, it might bring up a strict voice, a stern look, or even silence that felt heavy. Each of us carries different emotions when we hear the word "father."

As I prepared today's message, I found myself thinking a lot about my own dad, who suddenly passed away in 2009. When I think of him, I feel deep gratitude—and also a lingering sense of regret. If my older brother was the obedient one, I was the son who always said what I wanted. When my father would scold me, I'd snap back with, "Well, I got it from you, didn't I?" I said it so often that one day, he sighed and said, "You make it so I can't say anything anymore." He felt hurt.

Once, when I was in college, we got into a heated theological debate. I refused to listen to him. He got so upset, he left the house and didn't come back until the next morning. Later he told me he had walked all night. Now I understand what that night must have felt like for him—a father who felt ignored by a son who had grown up just enough to raise his own voice. A man walking through the dark, trying to clear his heart. Even now, when I think about that, I feel nothing but sorrow and remorse.

Sometimes I imagine… What if he could come back from heaven for just one day? I'd tell him—with a smile—that I now have a wrinkle on my forehead in the exact same place as his. We'd laugh about it. I'd tell him how sorry I am. Of course, we'd go hiking together, like we used to. And at the end of the day, I'd hug him one more time—just like we always did—and say goodbye with a smile. What a beautiful day that would be.

I know many of you in this church have already said goodbye to your fathers, long ago. And now, many of you are fathers yourselves—or even grandfathers. My hope is this: That your father has become a shining star in your heart. And that you, too, will become that kind of star in the lives of your children. A guiding light when the road is dark. A steady presence that helps them find their way.

God the Father

No matter what kind of father we've had in our lives—whether warm and nurturing, distant or difficult—there is one phrase that brings comfort and strength: "God the Father." Or as we often say in prayer, "Our Heavenly Father."

This expression appears throughout the Bible—from Deuteronomy in the Old Testament all the way to the New Testament. Jesus himself called God "Father." But if we think about it honestly, the words "God" and "Father" seem very different. God is infinite—holy, eternal, beyond our understanding. A father, on the other hand, is a flesh-and-blood human being, full of strengths and also weaknesses. These two words don't really belong together—yet we boldly speak them as one: "God the Father."

Why? Because in trying to understand the infinite God, we have no choice but to turn to what we know—symbols, relationships, and language that are familiar. "God the Father" isn't just a description of who God is in essence. It's a way of describing how God relates to us.
In the harsh, nomadic world of ancient times, the father was the one who protected the family and made sure everyone had what they needed. So when people said "God is our Father," they were saying: "God is the one who gave us life. God is our protector. God is our provider." And if God is our Father, then we are God's children—part of God's household, living under God's sheltering care. The apostle Paul reminds us in Romans: "For those who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God." Yes—we are children of God, loved, claimed, and held by our Father.
But the kind of relationship we build with God the Father—that part is up to us. Think about how you address your own dad. When we're little, many of us call our father "Daddy." It's a tender word—simple, intimate, full of trust. As we grow, that often changes. "Dad" feels a bit more mature, a bit more independent. Some may even say "Father"—a title that carries respect, but can also feel emotionally distant. The names we use shift not just with age, but with relationship.
The Jewish people also called God "Father." Jesus did too. But Jesus' understanding of God the Father was very different from what many religious leaders believed. For many, calling God "Father" meant something like a strict head of household— someone you respected from a distance, someone whose rules you followed carefully, but maybe didn't feel close to. But Jesus called God "my Father"—deeply and personally. He didn't speak to God with fear or formality, but with love and closeness.

And when Jesus taught us how to pray, he didn't begin with a lofty title or distant tone. He used the Aramaic word Abba—the equivalent of "Daddy." It's the kind of word a small child might use when reaching up for their parent's hand. This is how Jesus wants us to know God—not as someone far away, but as someone we can run to, trust, and call out to with all our heart.
Jesus knew the heart of God and lived in deep communion with God. And that closeness is what Jesus invites us into as well.

Abba, Father!

And this is what the apostle Paul teaches in Romans 8:15–17. He writes, "You did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a Spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God!" Jesus called God Abba. And now, through the Spirit, we are invited to do the same.
In moments of joy or stillness, and even in seasons of grief or confusion, we can say: Abba. Not with perfect words, but with honest hearts. This is not a name we earn the right to speak—it is a gift of grace.

And this name—Abba, Father—reminds us that wherever we go, whatever we face, we do not walk alone. We are held. We are known. We are loved. We are children of God. And that is enough. Thanks be to God.