

My Heavenly Father, My Dad

By Stephen Gabriel

For this reason I bend my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom all fatherhood in heaven and on earth receives its name.

— Ephesians 3:14-15

How did I come to know God the Father? Looking back on my childhood, I can see that it was through my earthly father that God revealed himself.

My dad was a merchant seaman, away at sea much of the time until I was in eighth grade. Even in his absence, though, I knew his greatness and his love. My father is a big man. There was no reason to fear anyone or anything when I was with him.

And there was no question that my father loved my mother and me and my five siblings very much. When he was home, all he wanted to do was to be with us. His life, then as now, revolved around his family.

My most vivid memory of childhood is when the entire family would drive in the station wagon to pick up my father from his ship after a few months at sea. During the drive home, all six of us would be talking to him at once, telling him about everything that transpired while he was gone. He loved it! He was where he wanted to be – surrounded by his children.

Indeed, my father loved me and my brothers and sisters unconditionally. Our behavior, which was wanting much of the time, did not dictate whether he would love us or not. He never withdrew his love in spite of the many times we broke a window or a lamp or how many tools we lost. He would certainly get angry and punish us, but his love for us was never in question.

Even when my faith wavered when I was in college, there was no rejection. Having played the role of the prodigal son, I am deeply moved when I read the Gospel parable of the father who awaits the return of his wayward son. Respecting his son's freedom, the father allows him to leave with his inheritance. And after the boy sins grievously, the father forgives him, because he had returned with a contrite heart. This is the picture of God that Jesus paints for us: a loving father who is always ready to forgive.

A good father makes it easy for his child to seek forgiveness, because that child already knows deep down inside that he is already forgiven. As a father, I know the intense sense of gratitude one feels when a child recognizes that he has done something wrong and says, "I'm sorry." My readiness to forgive my children has to be a reflection of the forgiving "heart" of our Father, God.

Like my father before me, I try to give my kids as much freedom as is prudent, given their age and maturity. Usually they meet my expectations; sometimes I'm disappointed. But without the freedom to choose what is right, my children will never mature as Christians.

Our Father God also gives us the freedom to love Him and to do His will. Yet, when we fail to choose the good, He is ready to forgive us whenever we humbly seek His forgiveness.

My father taught me about my Father God. He taught me that God loves me more than I can imagine. God loves to be surrounded by His children, all speaking to Him at the same time. And because of His love He protects me and provides for my every need. And dad showed me that there is no sin that God cannot forgive.

Let us intensify our prayers this year for families around the world. Too many children do not have such a father, from whom they can learn about their Father God. Divorce, abandonment and illegitimacy have robbed these children of a model they were meant to have. Let us ask God to end these scourges on our society and give all fatherless children the grace to overcome their circumstances and grow in the knowledge and love of God the Father.

Originally published in New Covenant, January 1999, p. 13.

Note: The author's father passed away on January 22, 2010 at the age of 84. He lived a full life, focused on his faith, his wife, his children and his grandchildren. He will be deeply missed.

Stephen Gabriel has been married for 35 years. He and his wife Peggy have eight grown children and fourteen (at this writing) grandchildren. He is the author of *Speaking to the Heart: A Father's Guide to Growth in Virtue* (Our Sunday Visitor, 1999) and *To Be a Father: 200 Promises That Will Transform You, Your Marriage, and Your Family* (Spence, 2006). His forthcoming book *Catholic Controversies: Understanding Church Teachings and Events in History* will be published by Moorings Press in the fall of 2010.