

## SERMON: “Poppa Mia!”

First United Church, Waterloo – Sunday, May 30, 2021

*PRAYER: “Loving God, by your Word, through Jesus, your Christ, by your Spirit, you call us to change our allegiances and to personal and social transformations. You embrace us as brothers and sisters in Christ and make us family. Among other names, we have been used to calling you ‘Father’. Fill us this day with the holy awesomeness of how we are enfolded and upheld in your parental wisdom and care.” Amen*

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Someone with a brain-child called on script-writer Catherine Johnson for help.

The idea was to take thirty songs from one of the world’s most popular rock groups ever and weave them into a musical production.

The writing, brainstorming, and rewriting last for two years and three months along with meetings with the original song-writers and production checks.

Then came casting and numerous rehearsals until the show debuted in London’s West End on April 6, 1999. One year later that box office bonanza had its North America debut in Toronto. Now into reprisals and a movie and a sequel, “Mamma Mia!” still gets large audiences.

A Greek island backdrop, a mother daughter relationship, wedding plans and reunions with old friends and three of mamma’s former lovers are backdrop and story line for a tapestry on stage woven around songs from the Swedish singing group Abba.

Their group name is an acronym formed from the first letters of each member’s first name.

In ancient Hebrew culture and the dialectical tongue named Aramaic, “Abba” is a word.

It’s the informal and familiar form of “Father”; more like “Daddy” or “Poppa Mia!”

### I GOD’S STAGE PRODUCTION

About two thousand and twenty-one or so ages ago,

God sent a brain-child into that Palestinian Hebrew culture, God’s own child.

That culture and the world in which it was engulfed needed help.

Take thirty to one hundred messages, stories, and revised commandments from the Almighty and weave them into a collection of teachings integrated with that grown child’s life and start a new movement, a Way: a Way that imparted and implanted God’s wisdom.

A Way that also involved recruiting followers, healings and wonders, mingling with crowds, socializing with outcasts, and clashing with the religious and political powers-that-be.

Cause a stir in Palestine’s capital city, and Jesus, leader of that movement, winds up on a hill outside the walls, crucified at Jerusalem’s dead end.

Three days later the death barrier is smashed open through resurrection and there are amazing reunions with disciples.

Within seven weeks, a strong Spirit of revival and empowerment turns the enterprise into church.

Even though the main character is gone from the stage, reunited with one he called “Father”, (but was also keenly aware of God’s maternal qualities and nature as well), the movement continues and spreads.

With the help of a new-gifted kind of director-producer named Paul, it overtakes most of the Mediterranean basin smack in the heart and face of the Roman Empire. Paul worked feverishly, wrote passionately to encourage that movement’s ongoing development. His lengthiest and finest letter is offered to fledgling congregations in Rome, the imperial capital. In the middle of that epistle, he fastens their attention on key issues and understandings. He highlights the difference between two life-styles: life in the flesh and life in the Spirit. Life in the flesh is self-centred, this-world oriented without reference to God. Life in the Spirit is other-centred, realm-of-God building; a life dedicated to God’s purposes. In describing that life, Paul says: (*Romans 8:14-16*)

*“For all of us who are led by the Spirit are children of God. The Spirit we have received ...makes us sons and daughters, enabling us to cry ‘Abba!’, ‘Father!’*

*In that cry the Spirit of God joins with our spirits testifying that we are God’s children.”*

Followers of the Way, are followers of Jesus who seek to live Spirit-led lives as he did.

Followers of the Way, get to know God as ‘Abba’, as Jesus did.

He felt such an intimate connection with God, that he would often call God, “Daddy”.

Followers of Jesus then and now get to experience God with similar intimacy and familiarity.

They get to cry out and exclaim, “Poppa Mia!”

Not only are they God’s children Paul declares, but also, like Jesus, heirs;

heirs who have a share in the realm of God in all its present realizations

and in all its future fullness. Living within, seeking to help create that realm

calls us out of the self-serving world in which we live to transform it,

calls us to love others, seek justice, create peace, live with respect in creation,

calls us to be the church and to celebrate God’s presence everywhere and in everything,

calls us to proclaim Jesus, so that others may come to know God as “Abba”,

and as a compassionate, caring motherly God: a God who is the consummate parent.

## II LIVES OF FAITH IN THE WORLD

The original recipients of Paul’s epistle to the Romans

were called out of a world of deeply-entrenched differentiations

between rich and poor, free and slave, male and female, Jew and Gentile,

any and all lines of ethnic, racial, economic, social, or cultural distinction.

They were called out to live lives of moderation or detachment

from drunken bacchanals and orgies; wanton promiscuity; greed, cheating, lying;

from sporting events that glorified blood and gore and violence,

from whatever served to advance one’s own interest at others’ expense.

They were called to live Spirit-led lives in the midst of such a messed-up world

as an alternative that was healthy, viable, influential, fruitful, joyful, just, and peace-bearing.

Nineteen hundred and seventy-some-odd years after Paul's letter got sent out, the movement continues, the church is still present in the midst of the world having passed through varying degrees of success and failure, through many dangers, toils, and snares, through conflicts within and clashes without, thousands of schisms and a few unions, through visions, and divisions, and revisions, through all the vicissitudes of life, death, and rebirth.

Followers of Jesus today are called to lead Spirit-led lives as Jesus did.

As people faith they live and serve alongside other people of faith and some who make no faith claims to help make this world a godly world.

*"One world, one life, let's get together and make things right."*

Followers of Jesus today still get to know God as "Abba", as Jesus did.

Sometimes, in our own experiences of parent-child relationships, we see and sense what a God-and-child relationship is most unlike, some form of life in the flesh

And sometimes, in our own experiences of parent-child relationships, we glimpse and sense what a God-and-child relationship can be and offer, life in the Spirit.

Juan has several outstanding memories of his father. *1*

One night, around two in the morning, Juan's father caught a man in the backyard trying to steal bananas. Juan's father ran out to the thief, with a machete in hand, cut the bunch of bananas in half and said,

*"Here, you can have them. But, from now on, if you need anything from the back of our house, come to the front."*

Juan's father is known by most through the Professional Golf circuit as Chi Chi Rodriguez.

George's experience well over a century ago was one we might name "bizarre". *2*

He had no recollection of moral or religious words of advice from his mother, but an effort or two made by his father lodged in his mind.

*"When Dad caught me imitating him by pretending to smoke a toy pipe he advised me very earnestly never to follow his example in any way; and his sincerity so impressed me that to this day*

*I have never smoked, never shaved, never used alcoholic stimulants.*

*He taught me to regard him as an unsuccessful man with many undesirable habits, as a warning, not as a model. In fact, he did himself some injustice ...; and I now see that this anxiety on his part was admirable and lovable; and that he was really just what he so carefully strove not to be: a model father."*

A rather influential twist of fate for playwright George Bernard Shaw.

Some parent-child relationships offer encouragement in Spirit-led living from an implicit rather than explicit framework of teachings and wisdom help us to form our own moral character and decisions, even seeking social justice.

In other instances, the modelling and inter-relating clothes us in affirmations of belonging and we are assured that staking our lives on seeking God's realm is clearly the path to trust.

Patricia grew up watching her father move through their small town like a white god in a tribal village. 3

*"He was a manager for the Southern Coal and Coke Company and totally loved and respected by all his friends and all who worked for him.*

*[Neither he nor she were as aware then of today's environmental concerns.]*

*At harvest time the local farmers could not wait to give him their first melons and corn.*

*They would never allow other hunters on their land, but gave my father permission to enter their sanctuary for quail or pigeon as if his gun did not kill.*

*His physical dimension can only be described as – shall I say it? – fat! He was a great fat man.*

*But it was absolutely right. His body complemented an immense spirit that seemed to wrap itself around everyone.*

*When I am asked why I wanted to be an actress, I always say, 'I don't really know. I just did'.*

*But I think I wanted everybody to love me, the way they loved Daddy."*

It worked. Even through her battles with addictions, divorces, and diseases, people loved Patricia Neal.

Alice had her life-direction established around age three. 4

Around that time her father called her in for questioning about a broken fruit jar.

*"I felt he knew I had broken it, at the same time, I couldn't be sure.*

*Apparently breaking it was, in any event, the wrong thing to have done.*

*I could say, 'Yes, I broke the jar', and risk a whipping ...*

*or 'No, I did not break it', and perhaps bluff my way through.*

*I've never forgotten my feeling that he really wanted me to tell the truth.*

*And because he seemed to desire it – [through moments of waiting loaded with tension and awkwardness in a three-year-old's mind] – I confessed. 'I broke the jar,' I said.*

*I think he hugged me. He probably didn't, but I still feel as if he did,*

*so embraced did I feel by the happy relief I noted on his face*

*and by the fact that he didn't punish me at all, but seemed, instead, pleased with me.*

*I think it was at that moment that I resolved to take my chances with the truth,*

*although as the years rolled on I was to break more serious things in his scheme of things than fruit jars."*

Maybe so, Alice, but you capture our hearts and speak to our spirits with the truth we find in your novels; like the truth about The Color Purple. God bless you, Alice Walker.

## CONCLUSION

When the Spirit joins with our spirits testifying that we too are children of God,

Jesus is truly our brother, and we too cry "Abba!"; experiencing God as "Poppa Mia!"

We cherish that and linger in that in addition to all the motherly nurture of God we receive.

It can happen in prayer. Quite often it happens during times of worship.  
We raise a silent shout of acclamation like “Hallelujah!” or “Maranatha, come, Lord Jesus!”  
or “Praise be to God!”, or “Holy Mother of all compassion!”  
Such an acclamation floods us with affirmation.  
It calls us away from a life in the flesh to a life in the Spirit.  
It calls us away from witting or unwitting rebellion against God into companionship with God.  
It pulls us off the paths that lead to deadliness on to ways that open the future to fullness of life.  
It connects us to that divine community we call the Trinity:  
with God as divine parental Father/Mother; Jesus, the Christ as brother; Holy Spirit as mentor.  
It calls us into and out of this community of faith we call “church”  
to share the love, compassion, and transforming power of such a God with others  
and with systems of the world that may be resistant, or may simply just not know God.  
*“The Spirit we have received makes us sons and daughters,  
enabling us to cry ‘Abba!’, ‘Father!’ ‘Daddy!’  
In that cry the Spirit of God joins with our spirits testifying that we are God’s children.”*  
In that cry we bear witness to a God of steadfast, sustaining and supportive love  
who continues loving all the world, all creation, everybody into wholeness and fullness of life.  
Such a God is the kind of Daddy everybody loves, or yearns to know and love, yes?  
*“Poppa Mia! Here we go again. Why, why, why would we resist you?” [Hum ...]*

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#### *Notes*

*1, 2, 3, and 4 All from Jon Winokur, Fathers, (Dutton Books, Penguin, New York, NY: 1993),  
pages 19, 174, 51, and 20-21 respectively.*