Children of the father?

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Lutherans are trained to hear the scriptures as proclaiming either law or gospel. By "law" they mean not passages from the Old Testament but all of the Bible's bad news: the sins we commit, the misery we experience, the sorrows we inflict on one another, the death we anticipate, the distance from God that diminishes our lives. By "gospel" they mean not the final reading on Sunday morning but the good news of the mercy given by a loving God, wherever in the Bible it is proclaimed.

Both law and gospel are heard every Sunday in the readings of the three-year ecumenical lectionary. One option for the second reading on Pentecost C is from Romans 8, in which Paul describes the power of the Spirit of the risen Christ in the lives of the baptized. We are now children of God, which presumably we were not before, and we can pray to God as a father, which presumably is a new situation that follows upon baptism.

Do we hear this passage as law or gospel? Is it bad news or good news that Christians see their communion in Christ as their adoption into the family of God? Is it bad or good news that we address our prayers to God as father? Are the dozen references to God as father in the reading from John 14 heard as law or as gospel?

I wonder where Century readers are on the issue of naming God as father. Do women hear this speech as a sign of slavery, or as a metaphor for adoption?

Of course very few of us call God Abba, papa, the privileged cry of the child and the deathly plea of the martyr. And although scholars tell us that few first-century Jews called God father in their personal or communal prayer, it is a fact that nearly every pagan on the streets of the Roman Empire called Jupiter the father of fathers, Zeus-pater being the obvious patriarchal way to imagine the head of all things on heaven and earth. To what degree was the Christian adoption of the imagery of God as father a cultural adaptation of Jewish tradition to Hellenistic cultural realities?

I am told that many young women now dismiss the concerns of us 70-year-old feminists who spent our lives reforming the language of ancient men into speech more appropriate for all the children of every gender to use, whether walking down the street or addressing God in prayer. The published worship resources of mainline churches diminish the use of father, include hymns that celebrate a wide variety of metaphors for God, encourage the praying of the psalms in which are many images for God, and amend some old hymn texts into inclusive language--all to the delight of some and the dismay of others. I recall saying to a Finn that, given that their language has no gender specificity in pronouns, God is not in their speech a "he."

The answer I received? "Yes he is."

May the Spirit of the risen Christ lead us into truth.