



### *An Ignatian Prayer Adventure: Trusting in the God we need to meet*

A father found himself in a desperate situation once just over ten years ago. During a particular time of struggle about his child, a staggering realization met him face to face: *I didn't trust God with my son*. It was an unsettling epiphany.

He had recently joined a “12-step” group for friends and family members affected by the addictions of others, and there he was asked to come to believe in a power greater than himself. He decided that he did not have to come to believe in what he said in the group, he already had in his life. He couldn't remember a time when he didn't already believe in God.

Except he was not truly comfortable and just couldn't seem to *trust* well enough in his own answer. He'd read Scripture about God's love and thought that he had already accepted the love of God as a truth in his life. Then one day, almost a year later, he read the following passage from the Gospel of Saint Matthew:

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.” —Matthew 16:13–17

Just as Jesus challenged Simon Peter, this Scripture passage asked him to trace his beliefs in God back to their origins. He began to realize that the way God had been characterized to him both consciously and unconsciously was a major factor in his capacity to accept and believe in God's unconditional love in his life.

When relatives or teachers cautioned him that, “God won't like it if you do that,” without realizing it, they were representing God as a creator whose love is “transactional.” That attitude said God would love him as long as he behaved a certain way (following certain [God's] commands and ideas) and acted accordingly. That image of God kept God and him distant from one another. And he came to feel as if he would never do things well enough to earn God's love.

In his spiritual search he came to realize that if instead his elders had said, “God won't like seeing you hurt yourself when you do that action,” how would that have changed the image presented of God in his mind and heart? That characterization showed God's focus is on loving him as God's child. And that representation of God better aligns with the Scriptures that he'd read about God. It describes a love from God that is unconditional and transformative in his life and experience.

As he began to break down the false images of God he'd been carrying around, he was able to make room for a more personal experience of God now that he felt safe enough to bring himself close to God. Little by little, his trust in God and in himself began to grow and bloom.

St. Ignatius understood how imperative it is to initiate one's personal spiritual journey using the *Spiritual Exercises* to uncover and discern a reliable experience of God's unconditional love as the foundation and guiding principle for one's

spiritual journey. How can we move forward if we don't feel safely wrapped in love by and with God? How can we begin to experience God's love for us if we choose to remain distant due to fear or uncertainty?

The Ignatian way of learning teaches that our attitudes and actions are the products of our beliefs. Do our actions truly match our words? Have we taken time to unpack our personal experience and images of God that we carry forward from our life's experiences and which unconsciously guide our interpretation of our experiences and our understanding of our relationship with God who is "Our Father"?

God's love for us is always pure gift. We cannot and do not *earn* it or *deserve* it. And we cannot and do not have to arbitrarily "measure up" to share in it. It is there for our *having and taking* and not for our *earning*. It's ours to seek, find and cling to for a lifetime of love, care, and confidence. If we can trust enough to believe God is waiting for our honest search and decision. Then we can find the One who will give us what we need and seek so diligently in our time of living and seeking.