

God's Pronouns

Proverbs 8:1-3, 10-11, 22-33; Luke 13:34

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Mother's Day

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What pronouns do we use for God? Traditionally we use “he/his/him” but most all of us know that God is not simply male. So do we use “she/her/hers? What about non-binary “they/them/their”? After all, in Genesis 1:26 it says, “Let *us* make humankind in *our* image.” And we Christians believe in that the One God is triune. What pronouns do we use for God?

Is God more like a father or more like a mother? One or the other? Neither? Both? More than? Different than? This morning I'd like for us to think about that for a little.

I want you to be patient and not become defensive. If we can't talk at church and learn here, where can we have such conversations? I do not have the definitive answer, but I have thought about it and I ask you to do the same. Besides, many of us, especially some of you younger and newer in the church ask me, “Why do you say, “One God, Mother of us all” as part of your benediction following the sermon?

So this morning, I'll try to answer some of your questions.

Right up front we need to remind ourselves that whatever answer we come up with is fraught with difficulties and weaknesses. Our human language is reaching beyond itself in speaking of God. So the very best we can do, is to speak

with humility, caution, and tentativeness. Indeed, often the best thing we can say is “I don’t know.”

But on this Mother’s Day, I invite us to think about how God relates to us. Already, I’m being more specific. I’m moving beyond speaking about who God is and speaking more carefully about how God relates to us. God is beyond us, other than us, so the language of male or female, father or mother all falls short. So we can say that God is neither father nor mother. Yet, God always relates. God is not impersonal, abstract. Not a concept. God is beyond us and different than us but God is also in the midst of our shared lives. God relates to us. So we don’t want to use abstract language or simply functional language as in naming God after what God does. God is relationship. And one of the oldest ways we have of speaking of God’s relationship is father language and mother language.

To further complicate the matter, different languages have different ways of speaking about how God relates. Our English language has no generic or neutral personal pronoun. We have either “he” or “she.” For most of the history of our language we have used the masculine “he” or “him” for double-duty, for meaning both masculine and the generic.

For example, this shows up in our English translations of the New Testament which was originally in Greek. Romans 8:12 is often translated, “So then brothers, we are debtors...” The Greek is masculine. But we know from the context that Paul is speaking to the entire church in Rome, so our newer translations say, “brothers and sisters.” Further on in Romans 8 it talks about being heirs in Christ, and the older translations say we are all called “sons of God.” The newer translations say, “children of God.” Both the Greek and the English use masculine language even though it refers to everyone.

And when speaking of God, the problem gets more complicated. For example, we sing the *Gloria Patri* or the *Doxology* every Sunday. The language is traditional, ancient, and older than us and it is relational language. But it is also limited to the masculine.

Partly because our language tends toward the masculine so much, I think it is important for us to notice there are other ways to speak of God than “he.” And even though it may rub some of us the wrong way, or just feel odd, this morning I invite you to consider speaking of God as our Heavenly Mother or our Loving Mama or... you get the idea.

I also realize that most of us do not mean anything bad when we use such masculine language. It’s simply how we were raised and how everyone around us speaks. I know Catholics whose formative language in church was the Latin Mass and to this day don’t like the Mass in English even though they can understand better what’s going on. I know Episcopalians who still prefer the language of the 1925 Book of Common Prayer and I know many of us who still prefer the 1611 Authorized Version of the Bible better known as the King James Version.

Much of this has to do with comfort and familiarity. We have enough change going on in our lives to not have to deal with change in church on Sunday morning. I know that. But the last I heard God is in the change business. And since we’re one of God’s local franchises, that’s what we do, too.

Language is constructive. What that means is that the words we use form us and shape how we see the world around us. In a deep sense, we don’t know something exists until it has a name or we come to know the word for it. So we want to pay attention to the words we use. I remember being taught “Sticks and stones can break my bones but words can never hurt me.” But you know and I

know that's not true. Words can hurt, cause pain, and instigate violence. Words can also heal, soothe, reconcile, and bring about peace. Words are constructive. Words do things.

That's why the ancient Hebrews were so careful about the name given a child. The name was not simply a label to the person who existed. For the ancient Hebrews the name said who you would become. You didn't exist until named.

So the Jewish and Christian faiths have paid much attention to words and language. After all, we're both considered people of the Book. Words are very important in our faith so what we say in worship is very important. These words, rituals, and habits shape our faith, teach us, form our imagination so over time how we see the world and see each other is transformed.

Furthermore, these rituals and words and traditions that we follow on Sunday morning come to us from across the centuries and from around the globe. We don't simply make this up. Since we are gathered to worship the God who is beyond us, more than us, we want to use words and rituals that point beyond themselves toward this God. We want words and rituals that are bigger and older than our individual selves.

But since this God is beyond our language we use words, symbols, rituals, metaphors as best as we can. One of the metaphors we use for God is Father, always remembering that "Father" is a metaphor, a symbol, an image. This word communicates God's relationship to us so it is a good word. It's used in the Bible so we use it. But we also hold the word lightly, knowing all the while that God is more than "Father" which the Bible is also clear about. Part of my urging us to think beyond such narrow categories is to remind us to not put God in a narrow

box. If we want to know this God we have to be willing to go beyond our narrow understandings of God.

So when we talk about God as “Mother” we are not tampering with the Holy. “Father” is not holy. “He” is not holy. Only God is holy (and even the combination of our English letters “g” “o” and “d” are not holy). They help point us toward this Holy One. And if we get too mad about tampering with these words “Father” and “he” then we must be aware of the danger of idolatry, of thinking these words and our concept of these words more holy than God. That’s why the ancient Hebrews refused to even write God’s name at all, for fear of the written word becoming an idol. Remember that words have power so the ancient Hebrews believed that to write God’s name down would be trying to control God, and that they knew was dangerous.

Staying with me, so far?

Another thing – we want to remember that the biblical culture was very patriarchal. To honor someone, to speak of someone in the highest degree, would be to attach a Hebrew masculine suffix to their name or in reference to them even if they were a woman. So when the biblical writers spoke of God, and wanting to use all the honor they knew how to use, they demonstrated their reverence by using masculine language. So we shouldn’t be surprised that the Bible uses predominantly masculine imagery for God.

Yet here is what is surprising – the large number of feminine images of God in the Bible. This morning, I want to talk briefly about a couple of them.

Proverbs 8 says that the first thing God created was wisdom. And for the ancient Hebrews one of the things they believed was that we first knew God as wisdom itself. Before we could feel God or experience God in any other way,

before we could have any relationship with God, we knew that there was meaning, there was order, that things made sense. It is the image of an infant who cannot express herself or himself but who knows when things are good, safe, and all is well. For the Hebrews it was all put in place by Infinite Wisdom. Infinite Wisdom put everything together and gave it meaning. And only when surrounded by a Wisdom that is trusted are we enabled to become and develop as a person.

Notice that in Proverbs, that the wisdom of God is in the feminine – “Her.” It is a motherly wisdom; not a fatherly wisdom. It is a nurturing wisdom, one that tends and is tender, and an enfolding wisdom. Not one that challenges. Proverbs is suggesting that this is how we first knew God – as a mother who knows our needs before we know ourselves; who knows more about what the world does and what the world means, than we can comprehend. And this motherly God knows it in our behalf, so we don’t to learn it until we’re ready.

And let me mention that another foundational or primal thing the Bible says about God is “love.” God is love. And the Bible goes to great lengths to show us in a variety of ways that this love is part and parcel of the fatherhood of God. But there is a sense in which the default definition of love in the Bible is maternal. In the Old Testament, the word we translate as “compassion” is the Hebrew word for “womb-love.” Before we could speak, we were embraced and fed in an overflow of love. Before we could walk, we were carried in a mother-love. Before we could care for ourselves, we were washed by mother-love. God is known in the Old Testament through this mother-love and this mother-wisdom.

Our New Testament reading is a brief episode of Jesus during his Palm Sunday entrance into Jerusalem. There is noise, children running, people shouting, waving palms, disciples trying to clear the way, and in the midst of it all Jesus is

riding a donkey. But there is a moment when everything comes to a halt, the noise recedes into the background, and the coming conflict hold off for one moment more. Jesus is up on a hill or mount and the city is spread out in front of him, and he begins to weep.

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, murderer of the prophets, how often I would have gathered you under my wing, like a mother hen, but you wouldn't come to me.

This carpenter from Nazareth we Christians believe, is also God Incarnate, God-in-the-flesh among us. Here upon entering the Holy City, the Eternal God speaks through this flesh and blood man. The Motherly Love and Tender Motherly Wisdom of God weeps over her people.

O tragic city where my children are brought together but cannot live together. I have come to you since time began as a mother, soft, big, overflowing with warmth; I have come with supporting arms to give you nourishment, I have been a womb for your gestation and formation. I have loved you with a love like a mother's that cannot be interrupted or broken, or ever lost – no matter what you do. But you would not come to me.

So it is with God – who has mothered us into life, nourishes us up to maturity and never, never, never gives up on us but continues to call us and seek us.

This morning, I am not saying we need to throw away the images of God as Father. I am only saying that we need to add the images of God as mother. We need to expand our notion of God and learn to pay attention to our language.

Womanist theologian, Katie Cannon's great-great grandmother was a slave in North Carolina. She had seven children and at birth or shortly after their birth

each and every one of her babies were taken from her and sold to other plantations. Katie Cannon said that her great-great grandmother fought the slave-owners tooth and nail every time they did this. She resisted as often as she could. Because of her rebelliousness she was beaten and tortured again and again. Over time, her legs and feet were permanently injured from the beatings, so that she could only hobble with great pain. It was all she could do to simply stand.

When the Civil War ended, she received her freedom. And even though she had seen some of her babies only for a moment at birth and even though she did not know where her children were – she set out on crippled and wounded feet, through all kinds of country and all kinds of weather searching for her children. Katie Cannon said that her great-great grandmother never gave up but walked and walked until she found every one of her seven children and brought them back home.

Today, we are thankful that our God is a Mother who loves us like that.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.