

Sermon: “Are You My Mother?”

Paul’s Sermon at the Areopagus

²²Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. ²³For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, ²⁵nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. ²⁶From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, ²⁷so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him — though indeed he is not far from each one of us. ²⁸For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring.’ ²⁹Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. ³⁰While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

Acts 17:22-31

“Are You My Mother?”

A *re you my mother*" cried the little baby bird in the classic children's book many of us know so well. I remember first reading this book as a child and then many years later reading it to my own children. Even if you don't know it, the story is simple: A baby bird goes looking for her mother, asking all she encounters the same question: Are you my mother? "No, I am not your mother" each replies one after another—the kitten, the hen, the dog, the cow. The baby bird continues her search, getting more and more worried: 'Are *you* my mother', she asks the car, the plane, the big scary machines. They give no reply.

When baby bird finally does find her mother, the question her mother asks is this: *Do you know who I am?* 'You are not a kitten, or a hen, or a dog, or a cow,' the little one replied. 'You are not a car, a boat, or a plane'. 'You are a *bird* and you are my mother.'

What better reflection on Paul's sermon this morning could we find than this beloved classic, now considered one of the great children's books of all time. Paul says in verse 29, 'Since we are God's *offspring*, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone—an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals'. God is the creator of heaven and earth, the one in whom we live and move and have our being.

'*Since we are God's offspring*'—Paul is making a statement here about *who we are*, a statement about identity. He is pointing to a two-way relationship between our understanding of who we are and the mystery of how we got here. When baby bird recognizes her mother she simultaneously affirms an understanding of *her own nature*, of what it means to be a bird. She was not a cow or a cat or a monstrous machine belching black smoke into the sky, she was a bird because her mother is a bird.

Likewise, when we affirm the connection we have to the world of creation, we are also saying something about who we are and where we come from.

Let us not mistake the fabrications of humankind for what we would call God. The danger is not only that we may find ourselves following a monster, but more disturbingly, that we might *come to think of ourselves as one*.

Sapiens?

In this context, and in particular on this Mother's Day, it's worth being mindful that in our time we are facing a similar journey as the little bird in this story. The question: 'Are you my mother' is taking on new meaning. For much of the past few thousand years of human history, going all the way back to ancient times, we have thought that what it means to be human is fundamentally related to our *intellect*, our ability to reason. As a result we have thought that to be made in the image of God was directly related to this: to be invested with the divine gift of intelligence.

This understanding, however, is now coming into significant tension in our current reality. We are witnessing in our time the dawn of AI, of artificial intelligence, and we find ourselves faced with a very new and very disturbing situation. If you are following the news, AI is quickly reaching a point in which we can no longer distinguish between a human and a machine on the other end of a phone call, or a text chat, a news report, or a music video. We are beginning to realize that AI will exceed our mental capacities in every way and represent the emergence of something completely new in the history of the universe. We have just about reached the tipping point, and it is provoking an existential crisis that we are only just beginning to sense.

Like the baby bird in the story, we are faced with a dilemma. We think that what we are is fundamentally related to our intelligence, so when encountering the emergence of an intelligence far greater than our own, we are faced with the same question: *Is this what I am? Are you my mother?*

This existential question quickly turns into a *spiritual* question. There are some very notable people out there at the moment, Noah Yuval Harari for one, who are predicting that in the near future we will begin to see new religions forming in human society. New spiritualities and expressions of faith, centered around what it means to encounter a level of intelligence

superior to our own—the ability to talk to it, ask questions of it, get advice from it, confess secrets to it, even to make requests of it to intervene in our lives. All of this will be possible. Much of it is already.

There is a part of us that reacts uneasily at this idea. *And we should be very wary.* When we read the little baby bird recoil in horror as the bulldozer belches black smoke into the sky and say to the bulldozer, ‘No, you are NOT my mother. You are a SNORT.’ We are relieved, aren’t we? What would this story be if the bird decided she was indeed made in the image of the SNORT?

Similarly, what kind of world will we live in if humanity concludes that the truest expression of its being is to be contained in a machine, to be comprised of silicon chips and binary code? Where does that leave the human heart, the human spirit—indeed, how will it influence our relationship with nature? The fate of our living world hangs precariously in the balance. Will we find ourselves distracted away from warming oceans and dying bumblebees at the critical moment when there would still have been time to do something for our world?

This is the question that faces us in the 21st century—a simple question and yet much deeper it seems: *Who are we?* The answer we thought we knew has proven itself to be flawed, no better than a false idol—no different than the statues of gold and silver that Paul was pointing to in Athens.

Imago Creator

So what do we turn to when thousands of years of human self-understanding begins to crumble away and reveal that *we are not what we thought we were*? Where do we turn to ask the question the little bird carried in her heart. If our identity is not defined around our intellect, what can we turn to ground ourselves?

Let’s reflect on this. Perhaps this brings us helpfully back to the point earlier about the two-way relationship between our spiritual language and our existential identity. Paul has a response to this. He is pointing us to something extremely important to what it means to be alive—it is the universal bond of *being born*.

We are born, each and every one of us. We are born into a shared world that connects us all. This shared world is more than what it seems. It is *itself* something *living*, something dynamic, something that manifests *as life*. We emerge from this reality, into this reality, as a beloved part of this reality. This reality *of which we are fundamentally woven* is nearer to us than we are to ourselves, and yet it is more than us. This is what it means to be alive.

In giving this image, Paul orients our attention not to God as Supreme Mind but to God's loving act of *creation*. We encounter God as one who *creates*, as one who gives life and breath to all who live. We are created in the image of a creator. What does this ultimately mean, therefore, about *us*?

When the baby bird realizes what it means to be a bird, she is able to fully participate in her identity *as* a bird. Similarly, when we as humans recognize ourselves as being made in the image of the creator of life, then we begin to see creation as being directly related to who we are. This is an important thread to pull on. Our identity is not fundamentally about our intellect, it is related to our capacity for giving and stewarding *life*.

When it comes to creation, however, let's use the opportunity of this Mother's Day to observe that we have lived for far too long under a false idea of what creation means. We have an image of an all-powerful God *willing* the universe into existence out of nothing. But this image of supreme power and supreme *non-relationality* is flawed in many ways. It is *not* what the Biblical record describes, nor is it an adequate depiction of what it means to give life to something. Perhaps in order to learn about the true nature of creation, and of the divine, we should look beyond this depiction and ask what we learn about creation from mothers.

What do mothers teach us about creation? That life *gives itself* unto life and nurtures that gift as it grows. Creation is not a one-time act. It's a sustained relationship of love that tenderly calls forth and nourishes, it emerges in and *as* a shared embrace. Life calls out and waits for a response, clearing the way and making a space for the response to grow into itself. Is there any reason why we wouldn't conceive of God's relationship with the world in this same way? Our point in referring to God as creator, therefore, is not to

emphasize the power and absolute *otherness* of God, but rather our intimate relationality to *and in* God. For as Paul says, ‘In him we live and move and have our being’. We fulfill our identity when we participate in the world of creation, giving our life *and experiencing life itself as this giving*.

Mother God

Perhaps it’s worth reflecting here, therefore, on the language that we use when it comes to God. Why does our culture and our tradition emphasize the *masculinity* of God, referring so often to the Father and so rarely to God as our Mother?

Clearly, the use of gender ascriptions to God should be considered nothing more than poetic analogy. There is no theological tradition of *actually* conceiving of God as male—this is purely convention. Genesis 1:27 tells us very clearly: “So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; *male and female* he created them.” And throughout the Bible there are repeated descriptions of God giving birth to the world, of God as a mother to creation, and to what it means to be given birth by God or born from God. In fact, we learn that the familiar name “El Shaddai”—though often translated as “Almighty” is actually more truly “The Many Breasted One”. We are missing something important about the nature of God when we neglect this dimension. And we lose something important about our own nature as well.

On this day of all days, on Mother’s Day, perhaps it’s time to break through this cultural language barrier and begin to embrace the *divine femininity* of God as something that has vitally important things to teach us. Perhaps the urgency of our age may require a cultivation of precisely this characteristic in ourselves and in our understanding of God.

In a very meaningful sense, the very first encounter we have of God in this world is in the experience of our mother. In her tender care for us as an infant in her arms—in her smile, in the sound of her voice, in the feel of her skin and her caress—we witness love and beauty and life all wrapped up in one. Before we even know who we are, or *that* we are, we hear and smell and experience love itself, in embodied form, and it communicates something transcendent to us about the nature of the world we live in,

something deep about the mystery of life, something formative about who we are in the very depths of our being: We are loved, we are *beloved*.

Isn't *this* the divine message that our heart most dearly wishes to hear: You are *good*, you are beautiful in my sight, you are worthy of love. You are infinitely valuable in this great big world. *This* is the truth at the heart of existence, this is the deepest truth. And there are no words to capture the depth of this divine office that mothers hold as emissaries of God in our world, living the embodied image of love itself. Molding us in words and actions into the shape of our true beloved nature. Thank God for mothers. For those who are here with us this morning, and for the great chain of mothers stretching back into the past, linking us one-to-another across the ages, we thank you. We honor you. We see our deepest nature in you.

Now as we move towards closing, let us be careful to say: You do not need to be a mother biologically to participate in the divine call of creation, nor is the role of mother in the sense we are speaking limited to women alone. There are many ways to be a mother in this world. These are deep, powerful symbols—and the question is what we learn about ourselves in them.

The Heart of Existence

No name or concept can contain God, no more than a statue or a building can. Every name we use, every word we use, every idea we have about God—they all need to point beyond themselves, beyond language and ideas, to a reality that we can never know *but which we are invited to experience at the very depths of our being*. This is the call of invitation. This experience is available to us at every moment, in every place.

Like the baby bird in the story, our search for identity and our relationship with our mother are fundamentally related. We should be cautious about the images we choose and the stories they tell. If we worship supreme power, we will aspire to power and give respect to those who have it. If we worship supreme intellect, we will see the world through the lens of knowledge and we will give deference to intelligence itself, even if this means that we would become a machine in order to have it.

If we regard the world of creation as the symbol of life, if we see in the bees and the birds and the trees and even ourselves the indication of a *pattern of tender lovingness at the heart of existence*, we begin to sense an invitation into a universal priesthood of creation, with mothers as our most concrete and tangible symbol of what is ultimately a call to each and all. These stories matter. Perhaps this story can help us to navigate the question facing us urgently in our time.

And so we ask: *Are you my mother?* In the spirit of all that we have just considered, I want to close us this morning with a blessing. As Paul said to the Athenians many years ago, we also lift up today in our time as a living message. Listen and hear this: *You are invited! You are beloved! You are infinitely valuable in this world. You have been called into the divine embrace of being, and you are the response you make to that call. Dwell in the peace of knowing this truth about who you are.*

May you encounter the One who knocks at the door of your heart, and may that encounter transform the way you see and move and live and breathe. May it bring healing and reconciliation in your life, and through you into the world around you. May you come into community with others, in rooms like this and beyond, in shared embrace. May you encounter and come to know, beyond knowledge, this deep mystery at the heart of existence: The one in whom we live and move and have our being. The one who gave us life, who bore us forth, the mother of the world. May you in turn participate in the divine call to create as an act of love in the world, to give life, to give of yourself, and to experience in the deepest sense *who you are*. In the name of creation in all its beauty, the redemption and restoration which is our promise, and the eternal love and life of the Spirit, we ask and pray for these things.

Lord, hear our prayer.