

God Our Mother
5/11/25
Grace Baptist
Isaiah 66:10-14

On the days we manage to get the kids and the food at the same time around our dinner table for a meal, we typically say the God is Great God is good blessing all together. I suspect that dinner time blessings will have different phases over time, as the kids get older where we expand our repitiorie of recited blessings or venture into the realm of extemporaneous blessings. As a teenager my mom was the designated person who said the blessing because none of the rest of us were willing. But for now, the kids love saying the blessing together and participating.

I'm not really sure when exactly this started, but at some point Andrew started interjecting loudly the line "by HER hands" we all are fed. Maybe he felt the irony of blessing "his" hands when I'd clearly done all the cooking each night. But he is exactly right, God is also "She". And actually for me its evolved and sometimes I say her, and but often times I say "by THEIR hands we all are fed". Cause if we wanted to get all theological, the trinity is plural. Now when we are gathered around the table with others like extended family or friends or something and saying the blessings, I always hesitate. Can I say whatever pronouns I want and it not be a big deal? Should I say them loudly or quietly under my breath. In our house we use a variety of pronouns for God. But I'm determined to not limit my children's imagination to God as only "he". "God is not male or female—but all gendered experience can reflect something true about God." all human genders are encompassed in who God is because God relates to us through human experience. "

Language shapes our perception. Language shapes our imagination. Language shapes our communities.

It crossed my mind, that on this first Sunday preaching as the interim here I am talking about pronouns. And then I remembered that you knew what you were getting into when you asked me to be the interim. So I'm doing it anyway.

What word or name do you use to call on God? When you pray to God, how do you refer to God? "Dear God?" Heavenly Father? Hey God. And Is it the same every time?

And here's a second question. When you think of God how do you imagine or picture God? A guy with a long beard on a big throne? Jesus on the cross? What image do you most often have of God?

I typically start prayers by saying... Gracious God or Gracious and loving God...when I was middle school/high school I think I heard our pastor say that a lot and so I latched on to it because I loved the idea of praying to a gracious and loving God.

But when it comes to how I envision God, I've had trouble to even name what image comes to mind, God seems too abstract and distant to have an image.

I asked Andrew this question and he said Morgan Freeman.

Have you ever read a book and then when you watched the movie you thought...wow I never envisioned the character to look that way? The thing is, Most of the time I haven't even concretely pictured and formed an image in my head of what the character looks like, but clearly at some subconscious level I did...because I have the response that isn't what I thought they would look like.

My guess is...we may not even have in our conscious minds an image of what God looks like; yet, I suspect we might be able to say....well it's not that.

How many of you saw the movie the Shack. Papa, the affectionate name they give to the first person of the trinity, God the Father, appeared in the movie as Octavia Spencer, an African American Women. And my guess is there were multiple reactions. For some it was as sense of refreshing ease and comforting love that she invoked in you...and then a lot of people felt an immediate resistance to seeing God portrayed in that way. I know there was resistance because that's what was in the headlines after the release...

And the truth is, Of course this image of God is inadequate... God is bigger than any one human perception, and more complex than any one story.

If you go and listen to the author Paul Young speak about why it is he used this image of God in the story, you will hear that he had some incredibly harmful experiences with men in his life, starting at a very early age. He suffered lots of abuse. And he himself had lots of moral failings. And it wasn't until he embraced the love of God manifested in a particular women who nurtured and loved him that was he able to actually let the love of God heal his woundedness. The window through which he had been raised to see God actually got in the way of him intimately knowing the true God.

"All images are necessarily partial" –Marcia Falk

In fact, this is why in the 10 commandments the Israelites are instructed to not make an idol, a graven image of God...because no image we can create will encompass all of who God is. If we try to create one final image of who God is it will be an idol and it will certainly lead us astray.

There are no adequate words or images that fully describe who God is,

And essentially there is no way to think of God without metaphors.

And that is the incredible thing about Scripture, it is full of metaphors of who God is, it takes these things we know so well and can grasp in our human experience and uses these images to point us towards God.

metaphors are both true and also incomplete. And they are a means by which we can know God.

Jesus says I am the vine, I am the light of the world,
The parables are metaphors...the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, etc.

There are over a hundred metaphors of God in scripture.
God is a rock, God is a father, God is judge, a potter, God is a shepherd, God is a bee keeper, God is king,
and then in Isaiah 66 we read this...

As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you.

Which brings us to the particular language for God that I want to explore with you on this day, Mother's Day: God our Mother. Of all the images for God, this one, though helpful too many, is still challenging, even threatening to some people. And the truth is there are some lovely maternal images for God in scripture:

- To the exiles who feared God had abandoned them, Isaiah promised:
Can a woman forget her nursing-child,
or show no compassion for the child of her womb?
Even these may forget,
yet I will not forget you.
- Again in Isaiah 66, God reassures Israel:

As a mother comforts her child,
so I will comfort you.

- And then there's Jesus comparing himself to a mother hen, wanting to gather her chicks to protect them under her wings.

And I also want you to know that referring to God as Mother is not some radical modern idea. Julian of Norwich in the 1300s dared to pray to "our Mother Jesus."¹

Mothers day is very sentimentalized in America and has been taken over by hallmark and consumerism like most of the US holidays it seems. Its 23 Billion dollar endeavor, they say. And apparently it's the day more than any other day that people go out to eat at a restaurant.

And I also want to say that there is this apprehension for those of us who plan and lead worship, around what to do with days like today every year the Sunday of mothers days. What a wonderful thing it is to celebrate and honor all the people in our lives who've raised us...who've mothered us

And we are also acutely aware of the hidden pain that often comes with days like today.

For those whose grief of losing your mother is so fresh....

For those of you who've decided not to be parents, we don't want you to feel as if every woman is supposed to be a mother,

For those who want to be a mother and are unable to, you see your pain and you matter.

For those mothers who've lost children

For those who have broken homes, whom never had the mother they so needed, we see you and a mindful of the way this day brings up all kinds of pain.

And in the midst of this complex reality churches respond to this in different ways...some tend to give out carnations to mothers...or some tend to say its not a church holiday lets not talk about this because it can be painful for so many.

But I'm realizing more and more that life is never black and white, and its not always helpful to do either, or, but sometimes its important to do both/and.

To both honor and celebrate and also hold space for the unmet expectations and those who don't find a comfortable place in "the box" of the American "mothers day".

And so while I want to honor each of these ways, I think that one of the faithful ways for us as a faith community to respond on this mothers day is to spend time reflecting and seeking to understand the nature of God that is like that of a mother, a grandmother, an aunt, the person who helped nurture you and support you. All the ways and people that are about bringing new life into the world.

Because how we think about and conceptualize God impacts our experience of God.

¹ If we only speak of God as being like a judge, we may miss all those places where God is more like an advocate. If we only picture God as father, we may discount all those places where God is described more like a mother with nurturing, compassionate dimensions. If we only conceive of God as a parent, we may gloss over the places where God is like a friend, or coming to us in the form of a little baby we need to care for. And if we keep picturing God as an unchanging rock, we miss the story of how God adapts, finding ways to keep accepting us despite our wayward hearts.

¹ Theologian Sallie McFague

It is important for us to use inclusive language for God, not because I'm trying to be politically correct, but because the bible offers so many images of who God is, why would we only refer to God in one or two ways. Multiple images add beauty and depth to our experience of the divine.

And if you want to see just how deep our understanding of God is mostly male, try not to use he pronouns for God. Interchange them with she, or say God, or really "they" may even be accurate.

Now I know before you get all riled up and decide to write me an email or come up after church and tell me that scripture uses masculine pronouns for God...I know...and of course it does. And it also use the Hebrew word Ruwach.. which is a feminine noun for the Spirit of God and it is used x378 times in the OT.

It's both/and. It's just mostly the church privileges one more than the other.
-how many of you have spent time thinking about God as our mother?

For me this is one of the task for pastors, to help us see the ways that we are limiting our understanding of God. Sometimes we don't even know we are in a box, and we need to help one another see God in new and different ways.

The other day I saw a young girl take a big swig out of her water bottle and with it came a big chunk of ice... and the intense and persistence cold took her by surprise and she couldn't take it any more...and she didn't know what to do and she kinda started to panic. And her mother gently said well honey, just spit it out...

The gentle way that God slowly walks this journey of life with us, who is patient with us as we learn to live in and interact with the world around us.

The unconditional way that God cries for us, and with us, and gave us birth.
We are molded and shaped simply by being loved by her...

One of the clearest pictures I've seen of what God's mothering love looks like today comes from groups like Mama Bears and Free Mom Hugs.

These are moms—many of them Christian—who go to Pride parades, college campuses, and public events with t-shirts and signs that say "Free Mom Hugs" or "I'll be your mom today if you need one."

Why? Because so many LGBTQ+ young people have been rejected by their families, shamed by their churches, or made to feel unlovable.

And these women show up—not just with hugs, but with tears in their eyes and arms wide open—and they say:

You are seen. You are loved. I'm so proud of you. You are worthy.

And I think: that's what God as Mother looks like.

Not abstract. Not passive. But showing up in the places of pain and saying,
You still belong. You were never unloved."

This is the love of God in flesh.

As I reflect on the last 5 years of motherhood, this has taken on an even deeper meaning. I think about the way that both my children, if I let them...seem to sleep the best when they are literally touching me or on top of me. I am reminded about how just being near me makes them feel safe and able to rest easier. I also think about the first time a child that I didn't give birth to called me mom. And the time it took to create a space for them to feel safe, loved and to rest easier.

And I think about the presence of our Mother God as a place of safety and comfort where we are able to rest deeply.

And even when we are no longer children, in need of our mothers to help us stay alive, I'm not sure we ever stop longing to be in the presence of that unconditional motherly love.

There is nothing better than the embrace of my dear sweet Granny, its comforting and its safe. And there is no place I'd rather be. Even now that I'm grown. There is nothing at all I need her to do for me... just to be loved by her is more than enough.

A visit with her slows me down. Because well she moves slower than me. Time with her reminds me that no matter where life takes me her love is so near.

And when I see and know that God is also a grandmother, a whole new dimension of God's nature washes over me and comforts me.

What a wonderful honor, privilege and responsibility we have to help the world know that the nature of God is also like that of a mother, a grandmother,

And I by no means do I want to suggest that this whole co-parenting thing between parents is cut and dry and one parent does certain things and the other does other things. Of course there is overlap and of course each situation is different.

And we give thanks for:

- The fathers who do mothering work—the ones who, soothe, carry, and co-parent with tenderness.
- The queer and trans folks who create and hold families that defy convention but overflow with love.
- The teachers, nurses, friends, and elders who “birth” wisdom and possibility into others every day.

There is something true about how God is not confined to gender roles and there is something incredibly beautiful about the ways that God's love is enfleshed in the particular love of our mothers, and grandmothers, and parents, and aunts...

The world today is wounded—but the feminine face of God meets us there.

She breathes into the suffocated, gathers the scattered, weaves what's torn, shelters the terrified, and births the new.

She is not distant. She is as near as breath, as fierce as a hen, and as tender as a grandmother's arms.

May you know and feel the love of God as close as the love of those who have mothered you.