

God-Language: The Color of Water; Or, Language that is Reverent, Emancipatory
and Inclusive.

Psalm 131; Isaiah 55:8-9; Matthew 23:37

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Today's sermon is about the language we use when we imagine God and talk about God. How can our language about God deepen our relationship with God and help God move more freely in our lives? How can our language name God who is Mystery, thus beyond all names?

The hymn, "O Sacred Head Now Wounded" has this most poignant line: "What language shall I borrow to thank thee, dearest friend?" All language about God is borrowed, that is to say, human and therefore partial. It is, to borrow a Buddhist image, "a finger pointing to the moon and not the moon."

You may have heard the story about the little girl drawing one day. Her mother came into the room and asked, "What are you drawing?". The little girl said, "A picture of God." The mother said, "But nobody knows what God looks like." The girl replied, "They will when I get through!" Sometimes we in our child-like ways think our language about God is *the* language about God.

So, how can our language about God be reverent, liberating, less idolatrous and inclusive? We humans shape language, then language shapes us. And worship language shapes our souls, helps or hinders our spiritual life and our relationship with God.

In Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, Shug, a young black woman who has suffered sexual abuse talks about trying to pray. The problem was, she said, that every time she tried to pray "man plop himself down on the other end." So she had to find new ways to pray and new images of God.

I have been thinking about how we talk about God for a long time. When I was at Union Seminary in the early 1970's, I encountered the various emerging liberation theologies, South American liberation theology, Black liberation theology, Women's liberation theology, Gay liberation theology. These made me reflect on the language I used for God, for so much of it in my tradition was male-centered and adopted images of domination. He, Lord, King, Master, Father. It often pictured God as white, male, old, and pictured Jesus with blond hair and blue eyes.

While I was a student at Union Seminary I grew a full beard. My grandmother Shoemaker whom some of you knew did not like it a bit, and told me so! (She taught Sunday School for years at Front Street Baptist) I argued

back, “But Mamaw”, I said, “*Jesus* had a beard.” She said, “*He did not!*” I knew the discussion was over.

I

So where do we begin? First, a *reverent* language bows beneath the Mystery of God. As Isaiah reminds us:

For my thought are not your thoughts, nor are my ways your ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts. (Isaiah 55:8-9).

Our worship words, then, point beyond the words to the God beyond our words. They should have a kind of transparency: we see through them to the Unseeable God.

I once had a Springer Spaniel named Maggie. I would throw a stick for her to fetch and point my finger to where I had tossed it. Maggie did not look where I had pointed. She fastened her eyes on my pointing finger. Sometimes we focus on the words, not where the words point.

II

Secondly, we need a multiplicity of images to describe the God beyond description. The principle is: *Multiplicity preserves Mystery.*

To focus on one image of God can become a form of idolatry, the making of a graven image, not of stone or wood, but in words. The Bible has a multiplicity of images of God, Father, yes, but also Mother, masculine and feminine. Today our Call to Gathering from the Psalms used these images for God: Maker and Shepherd. And there are non-personal images too: Rock, Fortress, Light, Wind, Water. The contemporary hymn writer, Brian Wren has a hymn titled, “Bring many Names” which images God in many ways, both masculine and feminine.

Out of reverence Jews will not pronounce the Holy Name of God given to Moses: YHWH, often pronounced by scholars as *Yahweh*. Instead they substitute *Adonai*, which means “Lord”, which most often signifies a male authority figure.

So we’ve taken the holy name *Yahweh* which is a *verb*—translated “I am Who I am”—and turned it into a *noun*, and a noun often connotating male dominance. But consider this too, the name “Lord” for many is a name tender and intimate, so we must be careful not to take away names that are spiritually meaningful to people. In general we need to be adding names, not subtracting them. Bring many names.

The author James McBride in his memoir *The Color of Water* tells about growing up in N.Y. city, the son of a black father and white mother. As you might imagine, McBride, then a black youngster with a white mother, who lived in a black neighborhood and was sent to predominantly white schools grew up with

issues of identity and race. One issue was the color of God. “Is God black or white?”, he asked his mother one day on the way home from church. She answered, “God is the color of water.”¹ I love her answer. How many colors are there in water? All of them.

Liturgical theologian Gail Ramshaw writes about the kind of worship language that can best serve us today:

I urge: always open it up, open it up. Open up the Bible, to see what the images mean. Open up the tradition, and find there Christian riches long forgotten, religious jewels locked up in dusty chests....Open up the memories of conservative grandparents, for whom the traditional imagery conveyed mercy. Open up the creativity of new-fashioned writers, who can share with others fresh metaphors of mercy. Open it up, open it up. By the power of the Spirit life, not death, will enter and grow.²

III

So now let us move more deeply into today’s discussion of masculine and feminine images of God. As I suggested earlier, a single image of God can become a graven image, as God imaged only as Male, or Father. We are witnesses today to a recovery of the sacred feminine.

The Bible has many images of God in the feminine. As in today's Psalm 131 which images God as a nursing Mother and ourselves in Her arms. Or, Jesus' image of himself as a mother hen who wishes to gather us under her wings. Or Hosea's image of God as the One who nursed us, raised us and taught us to walk. (Hosea 11:3-4) God the mother, we the toddler.

At Grace we have worked hard for years to offer worship language in litanies, hymns and anthems that do not have uniformly male images for God. (Thanks LeAnda. For example, in our anthem today God is named as Creator, Source, Sustainer.)

Of course, in English, the pronouns are a problem. A woman came to see me in my last church. Her beloved brother was transitioning to be a woman, and she wanted to love him through this transition. Sometimes she referred to her brother as "he", other times "she". At one point with tears in her eyes she said, "Pronouns are so hard." So in a time of transition in worship language we stumble and stutter a bit with the pronouns and nouns, but perhaps in the holy presence of The Mystery of God we all need to stutter a bit.

So it is important at this point in time to explore more feminine images of God. God is, of course, beyond male and female but partakes of both masculine and feminine dimensions. Both scripture and tradition are far richer in feminine

imagery of God than we know or use. Julian of Norwich, the medieval mystic used the name Mother to describe both God and Jesus. In one passage she wrote:

As truly as God is our Father so just as truly is he our Mother.³

Some of you are familiar with Bobby McFerrin, a musical genius in many kinds of music from jazz to classical. He was for a number of years the conductor of a major American symphony. He is best known for his calypso pop song, “Don’t Worry, Be Happy”.

He has written a most beautiful, chant-like, choral setting of the 23rd psalm. You can hear it on YouTube. His setting pictures God as a She. Every time I hear it I am deeply moved. Here is how he set the words.

The Lord is my Shepherd,
I have all I need,
She makes me lie down in green pastures,
Beside the still waters, She will lead.

She restores my soul,
She rights my wrongs,
She leads me in the paths of good things,

And fills my heart with songs

Even though I walk through a dark and dreary land,

There is nothing that can shake me,

She has said, She won't forsake me,

I'm in Her hand.

She sets a table before me in the presence of my foes,

She anoints my head with oil

And my cup overflows.

Surely, surely goodness and kindness will follow me

All the days of my life,

And I will dwell in Her house forever, forever and ever.

V

How about our words for Jesus? The theological tradition has focused on male authority figure titles: Prophet, Priest, King (historically male figures). Are

there non-hierarchical non-patriarchal names? How about the name Friend? As in the phrase of “O Sacred Head Now Wounded”: “What language shall I borrow to thank thee dearest friend?”, and the beloved hymn, “What a Friend We Have in Jesus”? Jesus called us his friends.

So here are some other names: “Lamb of God”; Way, Truth, Life, Jesus the “Center”; heard in the Black church, “Darling Jesus”; or the woman mystic’s name: “My Great Dignity”. There have been so many names for him through the centuries, rightfully so, for his meaning is inexhaustible.

VI

So, here are some closing questions: What language breaks your heart open? Brings tears? (Buechner says when tears come, the Holy is near.) What images help you love God, love Jesus?

What images have you needed to let go of because they hinder your love of God, of Jesus? Or of your love for yourself as a beloved daughter, son of God created in the divine image?

When you pray what are the dearest, most helpful images that come from your mind and heart? What language frees you and frees God in your relationship with each other?

When does language fall away and you commune with God in a realm deeper than words? These may be our most sublime moments.

Poets and poems often help pray as they make new language, like this poem by Mark Van Doren. He wrote a set of psalms. Here is Psalm 11.

As near as the south wind on my cheek—
Nothing, I thought once, could lie closer,
But I was wrong, dear Lord, I was wrong—

As near as the lips of them I love—
Nothing, I said, could ever be sweeter,
But that was before I had tasted this—

As near as the blood in my own heart—
What more certainly at the center?
But something else is, wait til I tell you—

You know, my Lord who is worlds away

Yet here, yet here where I have my being—

You know [O Lord], that singeth—not I—this song ⁴

- 1) James McBride, *the Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother* (N.Y.: Riverhead Books, 1996),p.51
- 2) Gail Ramshaw, *Reviving Sacred Speech* (Akron, Ohio: OSL Publications, 2000), p. 81
- 3) William Matthias has written a beautiful choral anthem for this text.
- 4) Mark Van Doren, *That Shining Place* (N.Y.: Hill and Wang, 1969),p.81.