

“Is God a She or a He?”

May 2, 2021

Isaiah 49:15-18a (NRSV)

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.

See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands; your walls are continually before me.

Your builders outdo your destroyers and those who laid you waste go away from you.

Lift up your eyes all around and see; they all gather, they come to you.

Genesis 1:26-27

Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”

So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

The sign outside our church reads “God loves you because she made you”. Maybe you have seen it.

Notice the “She” pronoun for God instead of “He”. Since it went up, I have received voice mails from 3 angry people. Those are the ones who left messages. They made fierce accusations: FPC is “unchristian, abomination, evil, wrong, a joke, embarrassing (so take it down) rude, outrageous, ‘the truth is God is a man’, it’s in the Bible, how can you even think about calling God a She; and what are you doing over there anyway ...” Wow, I thought. I have definitely hit a nerve.

I do like a challenge. But mostly I care a lot about people and how they can know God better. So here is a sermon about it

The truth is the Christian Church has always had a bit of a problem with God's gender. God doesn't have one. But it's hard to talk about God without giving God a gender. To talk about God, we have to call God something, and avoiding pronouns altogether is cumbersome.

"It" seems a bit rude,

Talking as if God was an impersonal force like gravity or inflation. So, God has to be "He" or "She", and in a patriarchal society – there is no contest.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church says: "God is neither man nor woman: he is God". You see the problem.

"There is a mother's heart at the heart of God," J. Philip Newell says.

I do think it is important. To consider God as a Mother. Because motherhood, a mother's heart, that birth mother's selfless love, are, in fact, authentic ways to talk about God and God's love.

And to my angry callers – it is a way the Bible talks about God.

"Let us make humankind in our image," God says in the Genesis creation account. "So, God created humankind in his image – male and female."

In other words, – You've got to have the feminine, if you want to have an authentic biblical image of God.

The prophet Isaiah wrote, "Can a woman forget her nursing child? ... Yet, I will not forget you."

And my favorite, from the prophet Hosea:

When Israel was a child, I loved him...
It was I who taught [them] to walk,
I took them up in my arms...
I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks.
I bent down to them and fed them.

Specifically feminine, maternal images: bending down and feeding –

is to describe God's relationship to us.

This is not just a politically correct effort to be inclusive –

but one of the most ancient Judeo-Christian concepts of God.

The Bible, written thousands of years ago in a strongly patriarchal culture, uses masculine images for God. About 75 percent of the time: king, warrior, father.

But, amazingly, for that time, the Bible also uses images, like a nursing mother, a compassionate nurturer, a comforting, sheltering maternal figure – a mother.

It's not wrong to call God Father.

It's just not enough, not complete, unless somehow –

you can also call God Mother.

Language limits. As soon as you use words – nouns, pronouns, adjectives – to describe God, you limit God. Ancient religion knew exactly what the gods acted like and looked like. So, they had idols.

Israel's strongest taboo was against the use of idols of any kind, even the idols of language.

And so, when it came to the name of God, Israel used a list of consonants. Something like JHWH, which we sometimes pronounce Yahweh. But they couldn't say it, because even to say it was to limit the mystery and majesty of God.

Exclusive masculine language – limits God. And that is contrary to the biblical point that God cannot be limited.

“If all we have are masculine words and images, what we have is not God at all but an idol.”

I get where my callers are coming from. If you've been calling God nothing but “Father” in your prayers since childhood, it isn't easy to use other names.

But we at least need to acknowledge – the overwhelming and sometimes unnecessary use of masculine language in scripture and the liturgies of the church.

The Greek word anthropos, for instance, does not have to be translated “man.” It can also be “person.”

“Let your light shine among men” could also be translated “among all people.”

A favorite hymn is “Praise Ye the Lord, the Almighty,” and then we sing a wonderfully maternal image, we sing “shelters thee under his wings,” (Pause)

but that’s a feminine image.

And there is the Doxology – typically in this church: We sing:

Praise God from whom all blessings flow;
Praise God, all creatures here below;
Praise God above, ye heavenly host

Instead of “Praise him, Praise him.”

Israel’s genius was in understanding the oneness of God, the gift of monotheism, and the mystery of God that cannot be limited by human idols – either made of wood or words – and, at the same time, the nearness, the closeness, the immediacy, the intimacy, the personhood of God.

God is personal. That’s the point. The creator God comes close.

The mysterious one who rides on the wings of the storm AND also – holds the people in his or her arms.

The one who fashions the earth hears the cries of the people and comes with comfort and compassion like a loving father.

The one who sets the stars in the heavens comes down to people, to feed and embrace them like a loving mother.

It is very much a parental God the Bible presents.

It is related – how we use language to describe God and the role of women in the church and the world are related.

In a culture that regarded women as property, possessions, with no rights at all and no status or role to play outside the home, even in the synagogue, Jesus was way ahead.

Men were not supposed to associate with women other than his wife in public, But Jesus talked with women, bantered with women, ate and drank with women.

Mary and Martha were his dear friends.

Mary Magdalene was in the company of disciples.

It was Mary and the other women who stayed near his cross as he died.

It was the women who came to the tomb on Easter morning, and it was to Mary that the risen Christ first appeared.

Women played prominent roles in the earliest Christian churches.

The Apostle Paul lists them by name as sponsors, supporters, leaders.

In its origins, Christianity was radically inclusive.

Wednesday night President Biden acknowledged that the Speaker of the House and the Vice President of the United States are indeed women – and most everyone stood and applauded. Troubling – the Christian church does fall far behind the world – business, the military and even our fractured government.

And some, like the Southern Baptists, are going in the opposite direction, prohibiting churches even from ordaining women.

When it comes to gender politics, Jesus was a revolutionary. And when it came to God language, he was stunning. He invoked one of the most intimate words in the language, Jesus himself spoke. “Abba,” masculine to be sure, was the intimate word a child would use to address his or her father in the intimacy of the home and family circle.

“Daddy” is probably as close as we can come in English. That was radical

God had been known as Mighty and Powerful. What is so different and so stunning about the word is its intimacy. God is as close and intimate as a mother or a father is to a precious child.

Fred Craddock said the biggest myth in the world is something a mother says to her child who has fallen down and bumped or scraped an arm or leg: "Here, let me kiss it and make it well," she says as she gathers the child in her lap. Is it the kiss that makes it well?

No. It's those moments in a mother's lap.

It's that close and intimate, Craddock says.

Jesus Christ invites us to sit for a while in the embrace of God, who knows us, who hurts when we hurt, who experiences our fears, our anxiety, our joys – a God who loves us.

What do you and I need most in the world? After our physical needs for food, water, shelter, what is it we most long for? When we're in trouble, when out of the blue disaster strikes, a loved one is taken from us, the test comes back positive, a relationship ends? The bottom falls out,

Or at the end of the day, late at night,

When you find yourself asking "What's it all about?" –

What is it you and I most need to hear and to know?

I think what we most need to know – is we are intended, that we are cared about, that we matter to someone, that we are wanted, that we are loved.

And that, is what the gospel of Jesus Christ is about. You and I are intended, cared about, wanted, and loved by the One who created us.

We matter to the One who is like a mother cradling her nursing child, like a waiting father running down the road to welcome a child home.

You and I are loved by God.

One of the most controversial aspects of the book and movie titled Shack, is Papa's response to Mack when he questions how God could possibly be a woman? "I am neither male nor female, even though both genders are

derived from my nature. If I choose to appear to you as a man or a woman, it's because I love you. For me to appear to you as a woman and suggest that you call me 'Papa' is simply to mix metaphors, to help you keep from falling so easily back into your religious conditioning." (The Shack p. 95)

Papa's point is that God has no gender; the male figure most people generally imagine is a social construct that stems from the dominance of men in early Christianity.

Since Papa knows part of Mack's lack of connection with God comes from his traumatic relationship with his father, Papa chooses a motherly figure instead to lead Mack back to a relationship of trust and love. Mack needs to see and feel. Perhaps the sign will do the same.

The "Image of God" is neither male nor female...

Paul says that in Christ there is neither male nor female.

The positive way of knowing, affirms that there is, in God both the masculine and the feminine.

There is a mother's heart at the heart of God, as well as a father's.

The prophet Isaiah compares God's love to a mother's when he asks:

"Can a woman forget her nursing child?" ...

God is neither male nor female but God is both.

And so it is to both that we may look in our search to know more of the Unknowable.

May it be so for us.

Amen.

(I have had some help from a sermon by John Buchanan, Phillip Newell, Stephen Tomkins, and Mary Daly. I needed all the help I could find.)