

GOD OUR FATHER – GOD OUR MOTHER  
Isaiah 49:13-19; Exodus 3: 13-15  
November 29, 2009

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God has many names. And it is a matter of some importance when you are talking publicly about God, or thinking privately about God, or praying to God, that in order for the names you use for God to have some integrity they must be, in some way, related to your experience of God; and in order to have some authority they must, in some way, be related to what the Bible says about God. And today, we begin with a question:

Is God male? If God is a male, exactly what male characteristic describes God? Is God a virile, strong, aggressive warrior; or a quiet, sensitive artist? Or is God the bearded grandfather imagined by so many in our culture? Is God female? If God is female - which female characteristics?... fertile earth mother, homemaker, Celtic warrior or Prime Minister?

The topic this morning makes us uncomfortable. It has made some people angry. Our church, on occasion, circulates a questionnaire among a professionally selected sample of Presbyterians to find out what people are thinking about things. On the topic of gender inclusive or exclusive language about God: 7% think it is an issue of the highest priority to alter God-language so that it is inclusive; 8% are adamantly opposed to any change. 85% don't care much one way or the other. For some - about 15% - it is a hot issue. For most it is "Ho-Hum."

What exactly is the issue? What actually is wrong with calling God "Father" and using masculine pronouns - "he, him, his," to refer to God? After all, the Bible does. Jesus did. What's the problem?

The problem is that the first and most important thing the Bible says about God is that God is not male or female. God includes both human maleness and human femaleness. The second part of the problem is that language is powerful. What you call a thing or a person inevitably shapes how you think and how you act. .

No one was ever more aware of that than the propagandists of the Third Reich whose job was to persuade the German people that the ultimate solution to the "Jewish Problem" was acceptable. They began, simply, with language: "Jewish Problem," and then "Swine - pig" linked linguistically with filth and with slaughter. A particular favorite designation was "bacillus" which everybody knows must be stamped out, eradicated. Racism begins not with laws but with nouns, not with ghettos but with adjectives. And when a whole culture becomes convinced that a minority is greedy, dirty, subversive, or lazy, slow, stupid, the results are often sequential generations of majority and minority who believe it and begin to act it out. We know - or should know - that descriptive language is not neutral: that it not only reflects the reality we are trying to describe, it often shapes that reality, or our relationship to it.

So what you call God does more than describe or image the Almighty - it shapes your own spirituality. And if the only language you have for God is masculine language; if the only thing you ever call God is father; if the only images of the divine which pop into your head are male or an authority figure; or a judge, or a monarch...your spirituality is not being shaped and formed by

the Bible, but by the culture and the language it uses. In fact, if the only names you have for God are masculine names, you are missing an important and wonderful part of Biblical truth which is that God, being God, is unknowable and unnameable but that in terms of our relationship with God, God has many names.

The genius of our Jewish forbears, back at the beginning of the story, is that they know God is the Holy One, the mysterious one, the one like none other, the one whose holiness and otherness is invaded when you start to construct images. God is a verb. "I am who I am."

So when the late Paul Tillich caused everybody to scratch their heads and roll their eyes at his Germanic obscurity by teaching that we ought to have a moratorium on talk about God...and that the only way to do it was to call God "the Ground of Being", he really was quite faithful to the first and most important thing the Bible says about God.

You see, the trouble with exclusive language is that it misses the reality and therefore, because it is only a portion of the truth, it becomes an idol. Idols, like heresy, are not so much wrong as incomplete. In religion, idols prevent people from encountering the wholeness, the mystery, the indescribable love of God.

The God of the Bible is above gender. The Holy One is unlike the other gods. The earliest story is very clear actually on the topic. If you are going to dare to image this God - to create a mental picture - you have to have a man and a woman. "Let us make humankind in our image," God says in the first chapter of Genesis... "So God created humankind in God's image...male and female."

Vanderbilt theologian, Sallie McFague, asks simply "Because the point is self-evident, one wonders what all the fuss is about when the suggestion is made that God be 'imaged' in female terms or addressed as 'she'." Part of the fuss, I suppose, is innocent enough. The Bible itself uses masculine images and masculine pronouns. Israel knew God was unnameable. Israel also knew that many of the deities in the region were female: goddesses. Judaism's very masculine tilt has to do with the need to distinguish its Holy One and itself from the Babylonians and Persians and particularly the Canaanites, who worshipped fertility.

And in addition it was a patriarchal society. Most were. Men had the power, owned the property, made the decisions, wrote the history and got to decide on the pronouns. There are no gender-free personal pronouns, so the Bible calls God he and him, rather than she and her or it.

But the tradition and the Bible are not exclusively male. In Psalm 22 God is a midwife. In Psalm 123 a mistress. In Isaiah 42 God is a woman in labor, giving birth. And one of the loveliest of all, in Hosea 11: "When Israel was a child, I loved him... I taught them to walk...I took them up in my arms...I bent down to them and fed them." Those are clearly maternal images. The one who bends down to feed children is a nursing mother.

Feminist theology suggests that God's exclusively masculine nomenclature is neither Biblical nor authentically historical. Our own history is actually very interesting. The early Christian community, unlike the culture around it, welcomed women, gave women positions of authority

and prestige. Clearly Jesus was a revolutionary in including women in the family of disciples, elevating the position of women, honoring their humanity and integrity and strength. Women are there at the beginning and at the end. Women are there at the cross after all the men have fled for their lives. Women are the only ones who trust the promise of resurrection and women are the first ones to believe it when it happens.

It is only when Western civilization, around the 4th century, decided that women were inferior - physically, spiritually and emotionally - and male dominance became complete, that women drop out of all positions of power and authority. It is no coincidence that it is precisely at the time that a church hierarchy emerges, exclusively male, exclusively celibate. The names of God and the exclusion of women from full participation in the church are not unrelated.

The fundamental theological question is not "Does God exist?" but "Who is God?" My favorite Paul Tillich story is about the time he delivered a public lecture which defined religious faith as "ultimate concern." Afterward he was accosted by an elderly gentleman who said, "Dr. Tillich, I think I understand what you were saying - that whatever is our ultimate concern is our religious faith - but my ultimate concern is whether the ultimate is concerned about me."

It's the question we ask at the beginning of life when we witness the mystery of creation in the birth of a child and at the end of life when we experience the end of life too soon, still incomplete, still loved and treasured and valued, and every day in between when we are filled with indescribable joy and when things come unraveled and life no longer makes sense. Is there anyone who cares?

In their cruel exile 2,500 years ago, the children of Israel asked that question. And the prophet Isaiah gave them this stunning picture as an answer: "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." In the worst of times it was a picture they all understood: a picture of a nursing mother...that communicated what they needed and knew about God.

And Jesus answers that same question - this time asked by the young man living in a far country. His answer is that magnificent, unforgettable picture of a father running down the road, tears of joy streaming down his cheeks, embracing the son before the son is able even to make his speech.

God has many names: "I am who I am." "I will be with you." "I am your friend." "I will bring release to the captives." "I am Immanuel." "I am your father...I am your mother." It is helpful - it is freeing - it is expanding and deepening - to try new ones in our praying. And if it is still awkward for us publicly and if we simply can't say the pronouns differently, try it in your private, personal relationship with your God.

So we come to table and it is suggestive, is it not, that the one who prepared the food for us most of the time was a mother. If we are fortunate, we had a father who cooked also and whose provision for us included the always sacramental experience of setting the table and preparing the food and feeding the young. But the one experience common to every one of us is that we were nurtured in a mother's body and nursed or fed by the one who loves us. And it is

suggestive, is it not, that our spiritual nurture and nourishment is nowhere more profoundly expressed than at table - the table of Holy Communion - prepared by God - who is our father, God our mother. Thanks be to God. Amen.