

John 14:1-14
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“Mother God”

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So as I read the story from John’s gospel today, a funny thought crossed my mind. How many times can the authors of this passage squeeze the word “Father” into our Mother’s Day scripture reading?

Well, a quick count using the New Revised Standard Version of the bible reveals these 14 verses call God “Father” 13 times, 10 in the last six verses alone.

As I think about calling God “Father,” I am aware of at least three groups of people in the church. First, there are some for whom the word “Father” is a most precious way of speaking with or about God. Second, there are some for whom the word “Father” is a barrier, a real “turn off.” Thirdly, there are many who do not mind either way, as long as the church addresses God with a sense of sacred awe, appropriate for worship.

As we begin our exploration let me add that the words we use really do matter. Language is not something out there, abstract and remote from us. Words are intimately connected to our personal world of feeling and thinking. Words affect our view of reality, molding our attitude toward others and ourselves. The words we use in prayer and worship shape the identity and style of our faith. Words are powerful!

In the United Church of Christ we accept that the authors of the bible were human. This means while they were inspired by God, they were not perfect. Scripture reminds us God alone is perfect. We accept the authors, nearly all of them men, were products of the day and time in which they lived; they were influenced by a cultural where men were more valued than women, men made decisions, and male-ness was celebrated over female-ness in society. The argument had been made that we still fight this inequality today as revealed by lower salaries for women doing the same job as men, and less opportunities available to women to work in their job of choice, and well, so much more.

Having said all this, let me place a spiritual foundation below our discussion... I think we all know the Sunday School lesson that God is not male or female. All the language we use to try to describe God is an insufficient attempt to speak about the unspeakable Spirit, to describe the indescribable One, and to define the One who is beyond all definitions.

Since it is Mother’s Day, I thought it might be interesting to share some very powerful images of God from scripture which are often left out of the discussion when Christians talk describe God. Scripture contains some beautiful, powerful, and helpful female, and feminine images of God. Many of them Motherly images.

Genesis 1:27 reveals the equality of males and females before God... telling us Humankind was created as God’s reflection, saying, “In the divine image God created them; male and

female, God made them.” In the 11th chapter the prophet Hosea gives voice to God’s anger, “Like a bear robbed of her cubs, I will attack them and tear them asunder...” I remember my own mother walking up to three boys who had stolen my bike from our yard a few days earlier. They were walking along on the sidewalk and my mother saw them, and said, “That is my son’s bike.” When the boys denied it she said, “Well I don’t know where you got it, but that is my son’s bike and you will give it back.” And they did. Talk about a mama bear protecting her child!

Then in Deuteronomy 32 God is described as a mother eagle, “Like the eagle that stirs up its nest, and hovers over its young, God spreads wings to catch you, and carries you on pinions.” In the same chapter of Deuteronomy the people of God are described as forgetting God who gave them life, “you were unmindful of the Rock that bore you; you forgot the God who gave you birth.”

Isaiah 66 speaks to the people of Israel returning from exile, “As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you...” I remember a poster my mother put on the wall by my bedroom, it too was a cry for comfort, a quote from author Robert Fulghum, “It will be a great day when our schools have all the money they need, and our air force has to have a bake-sale to buy a bomber.”

Then in Isaiah 49 we hear God’s word, “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.” Isaiah 42 describes God’s peace being born, “For a long time I have held my peace, I have kept myself still and restrained myself; now I will cry out like woman in labor, I will gasp and pant.” Psalm 131 says, “But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; my soul is like the weaned child that is with me.”

Psalm 123 compares God to a woman, “As the eyes of a servant looks to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to you, God, until you show us your mercy.”

Just to make sure you don’t think all the images are in the First or Old testament, Matthew and Luke offer Jesus’s lament over Jerusalem, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” And in a parable in Luke 15 we hear God’s commitment to search for the lost, “Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search diligently until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors saying, ‘rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’”

My favorite feminine image for God is actually hidden by English Translations of the bible. The First or Old testament was written in the Hebrew language and a prominent idea in the first testament is the concept of God’s mercy. God’s Forgiveness, God’s Kindness, God’s unconditional love. One of the words translated as “merciful” in the First Testament is derived

from the Hebrew root “Raham,” whose noun form “reham” means “womb.” In other words, God’s compassion, God’s mercy toward all living creatures is pictured as “Womb love;” the love a Mother feels for her yet-to-be-born child. Repeatedly the psalmists remember and call upon God’s mercy, God’s “womb love.”

I expect we are all going to have our favorite images for God, those images comfort and motivate us to be the best we can be. The language we use made of metaphor and simile is most meaningful to us. But even as we cling to those images most meaningful to us, the call as Christians is to grow and expand the language we use to speak about God.

It is not my goal to get anyone to quit referring to God as “Father.” I do hope each of us might challenge ourselves to diversify the images we use for God, because the bible itself uses Mothering and feminine as well as non-gendered images for God too. Like... God is Love. God is Spirit. God is Truth. And so on.

Thank God! In the last analysis, it does not all depend on the success or failure of the words we use. God’s grace will live in and through our most imperfect, yet sincere attempts to speak about and be God’s people.

Happy Mother’s Day!

Amen