

WHAT KIND OF FATHER IS GOD?

(06/17/18)

Scripture Lessons: Genesis 1:26-27
Luke 15:11-32

*“So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.”* (Genesis 1:27)

Three weeks ago, we celebrated Trinity Sunday. Trinity Sunday is a celebration of a basic Christian doctrine: the belief that God can be experienced in three different ways, and yet be one.

As we mentioned on Trinity Sunday, our beliefs about God shape the way we picture God, the way we think about God, the way we feel toward God, and ultimately our relationship with God. In our prayer we may feel more comfortable praying to one person of the Trinity than the others. I direct prayers of thanksgiving and intercession to God the Father. If I am having a dialogue about some aspect of my life that needs to be examined, I talk to Jesus. When I sit in silent meditation, I open myself to the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit.

We need to remember that our pictures of God cannot be other than symbolic. We cannot take a photograph of God. If we were to take an airplane up above the clouds, we would not find an elderly white man seated on a throne. The picture is symbolic of the kind of relationship we feel we have with God. For example, when in our hymns we speak of God as a king, it gives rise to feelings of humility and perhaps supplication, even though most of us have never actually lived under a monarchy.

Our religious language is symbolic because our language is limited. Our conceptual language is helpful when we want to describe things, but God is not a thing among other things in the universe. God cannot be found at the intersection of certain coordinates in space and time. When we talk as if God lives in a realm, heaven, that is located somewhere, we may believe this literally or we may be using metaphors and symbols to describe the unknowable. What is important is the relationship we develop with God and how that shapes our soul.

When we try to picture God, we also run into the problem of gender. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, we tend to picture God as not only masculine in psychology and personality but as actually male. This formulation is not inconsequential. The belief that God is male has

led to the belief that men are created in God's image, but women are not. This led to the profoundly disturbing vote at a church council in the Middle Ages to determine whether women, who were not created in the image of God, even had a soul.

The belief that God is male and that men are created in God's image has also led to the belief that the man should be the head of the household, that the wife should be subservient to her husband, and that "father knows best" when it comes to the way the children are raised. Some men, because of this belief, sincerely maintain that their wife has no rights other than the rights they give her. This has led to various forms of abuse.

In certain branches of the Christian church, this depiction of God as male is again not inconsequential. In the Roman Catholic tradition, priests are believed to function *in persona Christi*, in the place of or on behalf of Christ. The church maintains that Jesus Christ had to be male because God is male, and Jesus Christ is the incarnation of God. The apostles had to be male because Christ anointed them as leaders in the church. The church has to be female, because it is described as "the bride of Christ." Since the priest is married to the church, priests have to be male. This is why women's ordination is not theologically possible.

Although I can follow the logic of this line of reasoning, I question some of the premises. I don't believe that God is male; I believe that God is neither male nor female, or, if you prefer, that God is both male and female. I believe that both men and women are created in the image of God and are equal in the eyes of God.

With regard to ministry as acting *in persona Christi*, I believe all Christians, including women, are called to function *in persona Christi*. Was Mother Theresa not functioning *in persona Christi* when she washed the feet of the destitute and dying of Calcutta, just as Jesus did for his disciples at the time of the Last Supper? To maintain that only men can be ordained to ministry makes gender more important than love.

Once again, I find this line of reasoning to be not inconsequential when it comes to the ordination of homosexuals. This same gender-based reasoning is now being used by some branches of the church to exclude people of homosexual orientation from seminary and from ordination. The argument is that homosexuals can't function *in persona Christi* and therefore can't be married to the church. Homosexuality is regarded as an "impediment" to priesthood or

ordained ministry despite evidence that sexual orientation has nothing to do with the quality of one's ministry.

Let's go back to the reading from the book of Genesis that appears at the top of our bulletins. We are reading from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible:

*“So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.”* (Genesis 1:27)

God created *humankind* in God's image. God created them male *and* female--in God's image. If we want to talk about God in terms of gender or in terms of psychological qualities, we should probably say either that God is androgynous, both male and female, or that God is neither male nor female, that these terms don't apply to God. But if we are going to use this metaphorical language, we should remember that, at least according to Genesis, God is *both* male and female.

Jesus appears to have used the term “Father” when he prayed to God. He said,

“Our Father, who art in heaven, . . .”
and
“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

The Aramaic word Jesus used when he addressed God was *Abba*. *Abba* does not mean “father”, as we might use the term. As an expression of affection, endearment, and familiarity, it is more like “Daddy” or a combination of “Mommy and Daddy.” This was a radical way to depict or address a God who had been mostly feared by the people of Israel! I'm sure it at least contributed to Jesus' crucifixion.

Jesus was not only radical in the intimate way he spoke to God and spoke about God; both his ministry and his message were radical. He was more open to women than his culture and religion dictated. He had women followers, perhaps even disciples. He seems to have had a special relationship with Mary Magdalene. Whether, as Dan Brown suggests in his novel *The Da Vinci Code*, it was a relationship of marriage that produced a child, is not important, at least to me. It seems to me that Jesus' teaching and preaching has a strong feminine dimension.

The Beatitudes, for example, call forth a feminine response to life. They extol the virtue of being accepting, sensitive, loving, and forgiving. They value grace higher than justice, weakness and vulnerability higher than power. They provide a corrective to the masculine, patriarchal law that was the cornerstone of the Jewish faith.

Jesus teaches us that God has a feminine side, aspect, or face, that God has feminine as well as masculine qualities. An example of this is the teaching of the Parable of the Prodigal Son, also called the Parable of the Forgiving Father.

If we look at the parable as we would a fairy tale that we were trying to interpret psychologically, we would begin by noting the cast of characters. In the beginning of the parable there is a father and his two sons. There is no mention of a mother, of daughters or daughters-in-law. It appears at first glance that there is no feminine in this parable, in this teaching about God.

However, when we read the parable carefully, we discover the presence of the feminine. The feminine is actually present in the father. The father functions both as a father and a mother.

The masculine side of the father lets the son learn his lesson the hard way; he does not seek to spare his child from either failure or pain. The feminine side of the father is present in the immediate forgiveness he extends to the son. He does not make the son apologize for being such a fool. He does not make him crawl. He does not speak of consequences or punishment. He welcomes him back immediately. We get the feeling that no matter what the son might have done wrong, the father-mother's love for him could never be broken.

Jesus tells us that the father in this parable is a metaphorical depiction of God. The God whom we encounter in the Old Testament is a god of justice. His people are held accountable to the Law. They are punished every time they break the covenant. I find little of what we would call psychologically feminine in this god.

The God whom Jesus incarnates is different. There is more feminine in Jesus. There is more feminine in his description or depiction of God. I believe Jesus is telling us that God is feminine as well as masculine. This God who contains the opposites was incarnated in Jesus, and this God can be rediscovered through Jesus.

There are three points to this sermon. First, Jesus combines the masculine and the feminine in his person, in his relationships, and in his teaching. He is a man, but he is a special kind of man. He shows us what a man looks like when that man has integrated his feminine side. He has feelings. He has empathy. He has compassion. He functions not as a lord but as a servant. He is not too important or powerful to wash his disciples' feet.

Second, Jesus tells us this is what God is like. God is like a father, but he is a special kind of father. He is not the kind of father who holds our sins against us. He will never cut us

off from the light of his presence. He is a father who is also a mother. His justice is tempered by forgiveness; his emphasis on the importance of the law is softened by the grace that he offers us so freely.

Third, for those of us who are fathers, this is the kind of father we are called to be. We need to become a special kind of father. We need to take Jesus to heart both as teacher and role model. Jesus was strong, yet vulnerable. He was in control of himself, but he didn't try to control others. He could be angry, but he could also be tender. He could cry. Finally, he related to women with an acceptance and love that was uncharacteristic of men of his time.

Today, on Father's Day, we pay homage to our fathers. For those of us who are also fathers, it is a time to reflect on what kind of a father we have been, what kind of father we are today. If we are the kind of father that Jesus calls us to be, we will be a special kind of father. We will be the same kind of father to our children that God is to us.

I honestly believe that if we men could do this, not only our families but also the world would be a very different place.

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