

What's In A Name?

Luke 13: 34
Isaiah 49:14-16 & 66:12-13
Hosea 11:1-4
Deuteronomy 32:10-11

Elon Community Church
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I was driving down Six Forks Road in Raleigh the other day and saw a moving truck pull out in front of me. A couple of burly looking guys sat in the front seat. Now what struck me about this truck was that the name of the company was perfect, a name that was descriptive and to the point. It told me that if I wanted to use the services of this moving company, I would get the basics and no fancy frills that would cost me extra. The name was painted on the side of the van: "Two Men and a Truck". A great name!

Names are important. We choose our children's names carefully and with great thought as to meaning, sound, and family significance. We hire marketing companies to help with the names and slogans our businesses use to attract customers. We don't question the basic assumption of our media culture that image is everything. Names and words are powerful tools. They convey mental images that are much larger than themselves, images which can have a life of their own.

One of the life lessons I am continually learning is how language affects our faith. We would all probably agree that God is bigger than the words we use to talk about God. But, many of us have blinders on when it comes to some unhealthy mental pictures of the Divine because we don't take the time to see that they spring from images that have been with us since childhood.

A few decades ago, J. B. Phillips wrote a wonderful book entitled, Your God Is Too Small. Phillips shows us how confining and limiting our mental images of God can be, especially when we close our minds to any ideas of God save the ones we absorbed from our earliest years, the Sunday School pictures of God as the Old Man with the long white beard, God the Policeman, or God the remote Heavenly King. Our minds spin out all sorts of consequences to these pictures. We see God as unconnected with our daily lives, or we get the impression that God's main concern is waiting for us to slip up so we can be punished.

But if the central core of our faith is that God is love, that God affirms life and wants all life to reach its full potential, then we must use words, images, and metaphors that express this truth. We've got to keep expanding our mental pictures of the Divine, not let them stay petrified at the level of the Grand Old Man with the white beard. We must not let our dependence on traditional religious language keep our faith from growing and becoming richer and stronger.

The passing of time brings with it changes in culture, ideas, and language. Many Elizabethan words in the King James Version of the Bible are no longer used in common language today. Words like "quick", for example, used to have the meaning of "alive", but now it refers to speed. Archaic words like this one are still poetic and rich with history. We can still value them. It is just that we need additional words to get our meaning across today. The words and images which meant something to one people at one point in history should not become petrified or even idolized by a different people in a different time.

A living faith looks for new metaphors for God which have resonance to the people of **this** time and place. Theology is using metaphors and images to paint a picture. To be true to the picture of the God who is on the side of life and love, we must not only cherish the old words, but try out new ones. And not all names are equal. Some ways of describing this God of life and love are better than others. These are the ones we should seek out and use.

One of these images has already found a place in our language and our worship, the picture of God as a Father. The attributes of a good father are certainly wonderful ways to describe a God who loves and cares for us. And we can be grateful that our religious traditions have preserved this image for us. But, the sad fact is that we have often let the paintbrush stop there. We have impoverished ourselves and our children by not making much use of the rich imagery of motherhood to describe God's love and activity.

Theologian Sallie McFague says that "it is the imagery of ...giving birth... that creates an imaginative picture of creation as profoundly...cared for by (God). There is simply no other imagery available to us that has this power for expressing the... interrelatedness of all life with God as its ground. All of us, female and male, have the womb as our first home, all of us are born from the bodies of our mothers. What better imagery could there be for expressing the most basic reality of existence: that we live and move and have our being in God?"

Describing God with feminine as well as masculine language is an uncomfortable thing for many people. Even though traditional Christian theology has said for centuries that God is neither male nor female, the fact that positions of power in most societies have been largely occupied by men made it difficult for a powerful God to be described by religious writers in other than masculine terms. Throughout much of history, strength and power have been largely seen as male attributes, and therefore, God was depicted in scripture primarily with masculine images. Dr. Victor Gold, one of the editors of an **Inclusive Version of the New Testament and Psalms**, writes that although we understand why the human authors of our scriptures most often used masculine images for God, it is important that in our day and time we go beyond this. Dr. Gold says:

"The metaphor "Father," used for God, occurs in every book of the New Testament except its shortest work, 3 John. It is used for God over one hundred times in the Gospel of John alone. It is, of course, a male metaphor, and leads those who read it to repeatedly think of God as a male being... By repetition. However, all metaphors tend to lose their metaphorical meaning, and begin to be understood as propositions, as literal statements. This has happened in the church with the New Testament metaphor, "Father." By speaking to God, and referring to God again and again, as "Father," one may begin to think of God, literally, as a "Father," hence also as a male being..."

(General Introduction to The New Testament and Psalms – An Inclusive Version, The Editors, including Lutheran Theologian Dr. Victor Roland Gold. Oxford University Press, © 1995)

This unconscious connection between God and maleness has led to disturbing consequences in some fundamentalist churches. Some right wing groups come very close to actually equating the male or husband with God. I am not over-exaggerating here. In a book popular among the Christian Right entitled, **Me? Obey Him?: The Obedient Wife and God's Way of Happiness and Blessing in the Home**, the author, Elizabeth Rice Handford, writes very seriously that (quote) "A woman is to obey her husband as if he were God himself. She can be as certain of God's will when her husband speaks as if God had spoken audibly from heaven."

Now that might sound funny to us, but unfortunately, this is a distorted theology which is the direct result of religious people idolizing masculine language to describe God. And, it can even lead to the acceptance of family violence. A woman who goes to church and hears that kind of talk, that she should obey her husband as if he were God himself, that woman is more likely to accept physical abuse by her husband as God's will.

I can speak personally to that fact. I used to be the director of a domestic violence program in Franklin County. We had a woman stay at our shelter who was a member of a conservative religious

church in the area. That woman had been beaten and threatened by her husband for years. However, the pastor of her church came to the shelter, bringing the woman's husband with him, and talked the wife into leaving and going back home with her batterer because it was "her duty and God's will."

In the extreme, exclusively male descriptions of God can lead to acceptance of abuse. They also are not always comfortable for those who have not had happy childhood experiences with a father. Every person's experience of the one who has loved them most in life is different. Perhaps it was not a father or a mother, but a grandparent, sister, or a lifelong friend, who offered the nurturing support that made all the difference in a child's life.

I know one woman who has seen God most clearly in the love of the grandmother who raised her, the tired woman working two jobs so she could afford to send her granddaughter to college. One of the mental pictures of God that this grown granddaughter now has is one of an old woman with stooped shoulders, a wrinkled face, and rough, red hands, hands which gently pulled the covers over a sleeping child at night. William Paul Young, the author of the recent bestseller, **The Shack**, loves to mix up metaphors and has God appear in the form of a wise, middle-aged black woman with the name of "Papa".

I think of the people who have passed through my own life who have illuminated for me what God's love is like. There have been so many of them: the young girl in a Mexican village who gently rocked her baby brother in a makeshift cradle, the black juvenile officer in Louisburg who put his arm around the shoulders of a tall, angry teenager in handcuffs, the young woman from Guatemala who came with her baby to the shelter, both mother and baby having been beaten by her husband. The baby smiled up at me from his bed, a big purple bruise on his face. His young mother had spent her last dime on milk for him. Her face was sad, but fierce. No one was going to hurt her child again if she could help it. Her vulnerability and her fierce love spoke to me of God.

When we limit our religious language only to masculine images, we lose sight of other ways of knowing God. It's as if we content ourselves with only black and white paint, when we could be working with color. And, using feminine images as another way to describe who God is and how God relates to us is nothing new. It's at least as old as scripture itself, and probably a lot older.

We have to remember that the Bible was written in a very patriarchal time and culture when women were considered the property of their husband, and the early church fathers debated whether or not women even had souls. It is amazing, therefore, that the scriptures preserve any feminine imagery at all. But nevertheless, it does surface here and there throughout the Old and New Testaments like the tip of an iceberg.

We heard two such descriptions today from Isaiah and Hosea, likening God to a mother nursing her child, lovingly holding it on her knee and teaching it to walk. Jesus also uses "mother" images in the passage from Luke where he speaks of longing to gather up the people of Jerusalem as a hen gathers chicks under her wing. A passage that is one of my favorites depicts God as a strong mother eagle, protecting her young in the nest, pushing them out when it is time to fly, and bearing them up on her wings when they start to fall.

In the early years of the church, women scholars such as Mechtild of Magdeburg, Hildegard of Bingen and Julian of Norwich wrote extensively about God using images of a Loving Mother.

Julian of Norwich was born towards the end of 1342 and was respected as a great spiritual counselor by the church and the Benedictine Community at Carrow, England. She describes God's motherly side as the creative love which flows out to embrace us and all of life. She even speaks of Jesus as being like "our true Mother, in whom our life has been grounded".."

Mechtild of Magdeburg, another early mystic, said it this way: "God is not only fatherly. God is also mother who lifts her loved child from the ground to her knee....(God) is like a mother's cloak wherein the child finds a home...". Hildegarde of Bingen, a medieval scholar and nun, talks about the encircling love of God surrounding us like a womb.

Some of the early church fathers also were not afraid to use feminine imagery. St. Francis of Assisi wrote: "We are the mother of Christ when we carry him in our heart...and we give birth to him through our ...works which ought to shine on others by our example."

So, feminine imagery is not new. But it still feels uncomfortable for many of us because we are not used to it. We are used to the traditional names the church has given God throughout the centuries. They are familiar. They can give us comfort. Names like God the King or Judge, God the Shepherd or the Father. We don't have to give them up, but we shouldn't stop there.

Allow your mind to explore some other names that are fresh, or perhaps uncover some older images which have been ignored for too long. Listen as I read these names as examples. Let the paintbrush in your mind have free rein as you see the picture of God created by these words:

Breath of Life, Giver of Hope, Womb of the World, Creator, Liberator, Eternal Friend, Seeker of Justice, Lover of Life, Mother, Counselor, Surrounding Spirit, Keeper of Promises, Author of Love.

Let us not deny ourselves the rich imagery which is our right. We impoverish our spirits **and** our faith if we refuse to add other images to the ones which have been handed down to us. Our language can never express all that God is, but it is all we have.

Our religious language is extremely important. Words have the power to exploit and exclude, as well as affirm and liberate. The United Church of Christ, as a denomination, recognizes this fact. In the preface to the UCC Book of Worship, the authors write:

Inclusive language is far more than an aesthetic matter of male and female imagery; it is a fundamental issue of social justice. Language that is truly inclusive affirms sexuality, racial and ethnic background, stages of maturity, and degrees of limiting conditions. It shows respect for all people.

(<http://www.ucc.org/worship/inclusive-language/>)

At its best, our religious language enables us to see God more clearly, the God who is the Creator and Lover of Life, and it enables us to see ourselves in our true light, male and female, created in the very image of God and equally loved. When we come together to worship, we want to be inclusive and affirming of all people, as we believe that each person here wears God's face. Therefore, it may be time to sing other versions of "The Gloria Patri" or "Doxology". It might be time to use a version of the Lord's Prayer which reminds us that God has motherly attributes as well as fatherly ones.

Names are **not** enough. But they are all we have to describe the God who is beyond our words. Therefore, bring MANY names. Let's dust off our poet's pens and pick up our paintbrushes as we celebrate the great, living God who loves us more than we could ever imagine or say. **AMEN.**