

**Sermon Preached January 18, 2015 – the Divine Feminine
Year B, Epiphany 2
St. John’s Episcopal Church
Beverly Farms, Massachusetts
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Come Holy Spirit, come. Amen.

Miss Jones had been giving her second-grade students a lesson on science. She had explained about magnets and showed how they would pick up nails and other bits of iron. Now it was question time, and she asked, “My name begins with the letter 'M' and I pick up things. What am I?” A little boy on the front row proudly said, “You're a mother!”

As you know in my sermons I sometimes refer to God as “she.” There are some people who are delighted with my use of the feminine pronoun. They feel the feminine aspect of the Divine has for too long been diminished. While others do not care for this development at all, believing my use of it is done for the purposes of political correctness, and they find it unhelpful for their spiritual lives. While some of you may not have ever even noticed I do this at all!... ☺

There is lots of lively debate on the subject in Christianity, but I will share with you my thoughts.

It is often pointed out that most references to God in scripture are male. Words like God, Lord, Father, King, and so on, are masculine. The Bible is full of them. It is no surprise then that when speaking of God in the church, historically, the church uses masculine pronouns to refer to the Divine. Most of us grew up with this as the norm. Many feel more comfortable with this usage. Others do not, but don't know that there could be an alternative.

The reality is there is much in scripture that points to a feminine aspect to the Divine. For instance, there are numerous metaphors where the Almighty is portrayed as female. “Isaiah 42:14 has God saying, ‘I will cry out like a woman in labor,’ and Isaiah 46:3 records God’s words as ‘the house of Israel, who have been borne by me from your birth, carried from the womb.’ In Isaiah 49:15, God inquired: ‘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.’ The psalmist used a female attribute in speaking of God when he said, ‘But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother’ [Psalm 121:2]. In Isaiah 66:13, Jehovah promised: ‘As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you.’ In one of His parables, Jesus portrayed God as a woman diligently sweeping her house in search of a single lost coin (Luke 15:8-10). And in Matthew 23:37, Jesus employed a female figure to refer to Himself in His lament over the city of David: ‘How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings.’”¹ Or the birth metaphor in Deuteronomy 32:18: “You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you; you forgot the God who gave you birth.” There are many others.

But some point out that while there are numerous metaphors for God as female, the Almighty is never specifically referred to as “she” or “Mother” or some such feminine title, therefore we should not either. But the thing is, that is not exactly true, and the great insight of this lies in the Doctrine of the Trinity and the complexities of Biblical translations.

¹ <http://www.apologeticspress.org/APContent.aspx?category=11&article=1165>, 1/17/15. See also: (see Ps. 123:2; Hosea 13:8; Luke 13:34; 1 Pet. 2:2-3).

As Christians we believe that there is one God, but this one God has three expressions, or ways of being experienced by humanity. We call these three persons of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Not three Gods, but three expressions of the one God.

God is very big. Truly, larger than we can imagine. So large that no vision or understanding can capture all that God is. I am reminded of the ancient Indian story of six blind men and an elephant. Each of the six men touches an elephant and each is asked to describe the creature. “The blind man who feels a leg says the elephant is like a pillar; the one who feels the tail says the elephant is like a rope; the one who feels the trunk says the elephant is like a tree branch; the one who feels the ear says the elephant is like a hand fan; the one who feels the belly says the elephant is like a wall; and the one who feels the tusk says the elephant is like a solid pipe.”² Different experiences of the one elephant. All true. This image is like humanity trying to describe God. We can never know all of the Divine and in our limited way we experience the one God in different ways. Christians have called this the Trinity. And while God the Father and God the Son have always been understood to be male, God the Holy Spirit has not. In fact, there is a preponderance of evidence indicating that scripture understands the Holy Spirit to be female.

The word usually used for “Spirit” in the Hebrew Bible is Ruach, which is a feminine word in Hebrew. At the beginning of Genesis in the creation story it says, “And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters,” and that Spirit is very clearly referred to as “she.” Now Judaism has a slightly different understanding of the Holy Spirit than Christianity. They would not call the Spirit “God,” but an emanation of God. And this Holy Spirit is understood as

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blind_men_and_an_elephant, 1/17/15

sometimes male and sometimes female.³ But in the Christian translations of the Hebrew Bible the references to “she” in regards to the Spirit are omitted. That omission is common. Here are some corrected translations that refer to the Spirit. In Job 33:4 it says, “The SPIRIT of God, SHE-made-me, and, the BREATH of God, SHE-is-keeping-me-alive.” In Psalm 143:10 it says, “YOUR SPIRIT is good; SHE-shall-lead me into the land of uprightness.” In Isaiah 11:1-2 it says, “There shall come forth a Rod out of the Stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of HIS Roots and the SPIRIT of YAHUVEH- SHE-shall-rest-upon-him -the SPIRIT of Wisdom and Understanding the SPIRIT of Counsel and Might, the SPIRIT of Knowledge and of the Fear of YAHUVEH.” There are dozens of other instances in the Bible where the Holy Spirit is called “she.”⁴

That last translation mentions Wisdom and its connection to Spirit. Many of you may be aware of the research of Evan Randolph and his pursuit of the Divine Feminine. He was the one who clarified to me the relationship between Wisdom and Spirit.⁵ In the Hebrew Bible Wisdom is portrayed as a woman. For instance in Proverbs 1:20 it says “Wisdom cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice.” Christians readily agree that Wisdom is personified as a woman throughout the Hebrew Bible. But what is often neglected is the connection between Wisdom and the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, like that found in the above Isaiah passage and what is found in Proverbs 8:27-31 “When he set the heavens in their place I (wisdom) was

³ <http://jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/7833-holy-spirit>

⁴ Genesis 1:2, Exodus 31:3; 35:31, Numbers 11:26; 24:2, Judges 3:10; 6:34; 11:29; 13:25; 14:6,19; 15:14, 1 Samuel 10:6,10; 11:6; 16:13,14; 19:20,23, Job 26:13; 33:4; Psalms 51:12; 143:10, Nehemiah 9:20, 1 Chronicles 12:18, 2 Chronicles 15:1; 20:14; 24:20, 2 Kings 2:15, Isaiah 11:2; 40:7; 59:19, Ezekiel 1:12,20,21; 2:2; 3:12,14,24; 8:3; 11:1,5,24; 36:26; 37:1; 43:5, Haggai 2:5 – (check out an interlinear Bible to see)

http://www.adishakti.org/_/feminine_gender_of_the_holy_spirit.htm#sthash.OEr2Mgqq.dpuf

⁵ <http://www.athena-holyspirit.com/> & <http://www.randolphkin.com/athenaHS/index6.htm>

there.” The female Wisdom was another name for the female Holy Spirit present at and part of the beginning of creation.

When I studied French and German it confounded me as an English speaker that words had genders associated with them. This is what creates part of the confusion in translations. As was pointed out earlier, in Hebrew the word for “Spirit” is a female noun. It is also female in Aramaic, the language which Jesus spoke. In Greek, however, the word for Spirit is neuter. So occasions in the Greek New Testament where Jesus mentions “Spirit,” English translators, seeing the word “Spirit” portrayed as neuter, noting English doesn’t have a neuter, took it upon themselves to translate “Spirit” as masculine. However, since Jesus spoke Aramaic, every time he spoke of Spirit, Jesus was actually referring to Spirit as a “she.” Jesus’ Aramaic was translated to Greek was translated to English and the gender was lost. Translations of translations allowed misunderstandings to develop.

So if the Holy Spirit is female, then God the Trinity, the fullness of God, encompasses both the male of the Father and the Son, and the female of the Holy Spirit.

So is God male or female? And how should we refer to God? And why do we care?

The short answer is: God is neither male nor female. God is both. God is neither. Gender is an attribute of those in the body. As is discussed in our Epistle reading this morning, we are of the flesh, of the body.

However, God is Spirit. Moses wrote in Numbers 23:19: “God is not a man...neither the son of man.” While in Genesis 1.27 it says, “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” Both genders are found in God. Yet remember, God is very big and gender is very small. God will not be contained by such limitations, rather, God will contain them within God’s self.

While it is perfectly acceptable to use only masculine pronouns for God, it limits God. Scripture itself uses feminine images, metaphors and similes for the Divine. The Bible often refers to the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, as female. Many early church leaders referred to the Holy Spirit as female. It is likely that Jesus himself referred to the Holy Spirit as “she.” Yet using only feminine pronouns for God is also theologically incorrect. So we are stuck. And the problem isn’t God’s, it is our language. We cannot possibly encompass all that God is with human language. My solution, and it is one that is used by many, is to mix it up. I sometimes use male pronouns and sometimes use female pronouns when referring to the Almighty. Both are correct. Using just one gender is not wrong, but less correct and makes God smaller. I believe in allowing God to be as large and complex as possible, even if Her reality is beyond our safe, neatly-ordered categories. He is going to startle us, move us, mess with our heads. She is the master of paradox and the jester of joy. He loves us like a mother. She protects us like a father. God will not be domesticated.

I find this very reassuring. The day that God is fully understandable to me is the day that God becomes smaller than me, and therefore not very meaningful. Rather, the enormity of God, so far and above human knowing, human gender, human limitations, is what makes God, well,

God. I can lean into the All-in-All, who is beyond language and classification, and trust that I am accepted, even in the particularities of all my little human bodily limitations. It is in Her arms that the completeness of all that I am, is known and loved. Amen.