

**Sermon Preached January 25, 2015
Year B, Epiphany 3
St. John's Episcopal Church
Beverly Farms, Massachusetts
The Rev. Stephanie Chase Bradbury**

Come, Holy Spirit, Come. Amen.

A young woman brought her fiancé home to meet her parents. After dinner, her father asked the young man into his study for a chat. “So, what are your plans?” The Father asked. “I’m a theology scholar,” the young man replied. “Admirable,” the father said, “but what will you do to provide a nice home for my daughter?” “I will study and God will provide,” the young man explained. “And how will you afford to raise children?” The Father asked? “God will provide,” said the young man. The men left the study and the mother asked her husband, “How did it go?” “Very well; I like him. He has no money or employment plans,” the father said. “But on the other hand, he thinks I’m God.”

Twenty years ago, when I was first ordained, I attended a retreat for female clergy. It was a small, warm group of faithful women and we met for two days of support, prayer, and discussion. One of the activities planned was creative. A table was laid out with numerous magazines and we each were handed a pair of scissors. We were asked to cut out images in the magazines that depicted God for us and then paste them to a large sheet of paper on the wall. Images like a crown, or tree, or water, and so on. This, then, would create a pictorial vision of the Almighty. We all busily got to work cutting and pasting and talking and laughing. I was the youngest woman present. When the mural was finished it was lovely. Some pictures were funny, some were serious, many were thought-provoking. The remarkable thing was, almost every

human depiction of God that was present was of a female or child. The only exception was one large picture of a laughing father carrying his laughing child on his back. God as loving Father. The most senior female cleric present pointed to this picture and asked, rather condescendingly, “Who put that picture on here? Who added a picture of a man to our vision of God?” I admitted, I was the one who had done so, whereupon I felt dismissed by the group. I believe I was perceived as young, naïve, and conservative, with no wisdom or original thinking of my own.

I was too shy and intimidated to speak up for why I had placed that picture there. They had misjudged my motives and I foolishly didn’t clarify them. But the reason I had placed a prominent picture of a man in the collage was precisely because all the other human depictions there were of women and children. God as comforting mother. God as playful child, and so on. I, however, didn’t want to limit God. I wanted the entire fullness of God depicted, so I added a man. In fact, if the collage had contained only pictures of men, I would have added a picture of a woman. I don’t believe God is male. Nor do I believe God is female. But God encompasses the entirety of creation within God’s self, and that includes gender. When we depict or speak of the Divine, it is good and right, to the best of our ability, to make it as complete a depiction as we are able.

In last week’s sermon, we looked at the many feminine metaphors for God found in the Bible. We also looked at the scriptural connection between Wisdom and the Holy Spirit, and how She is Biblically understood as female. We also reflected on the doctrine of the Trinity and how it allows us to understand God as both male and female. And finally we noted that God is

very large, and gender is very small, and that we should not limit the Divine with human attributes.

This discussion is important because what language we use regarding God impacts what we believe about God, ourselves, and others. The National Episcopal Church has made great efforts in recent decades to use more inclusive language in worship, not because it is politically correct, but because it is theologically correct. The national church notes, “This call for inclusive language was rooted in the theological understanding that God includes and transcends human masculinity and femininity. God is neither male nor female. Both women and men are equally loved and included by God and should be valued and shown respect in the church's language... Inclusive language also means the use of male and female imagery and metaphors in a balanced way to express the truths we know of God. Inclusive language may challenge the church to discover new depths of meaning and possibility in the words of faith that we use.”¹

Language has power, and right use of language will give us a better grasp of the fullness of God, and deepen our spiritual life. The 1979 Prayer Book made efforts to be more gender inclusive in speaking of God. Then again in the 90's the Episcopal Church created supplemental liturgies in a book entitled, “Enriching our Worship.” In the preface of this book the then Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold noted, “Expanding our vocabulary of prayer and the ways in which we name the Holy One bear witness to the fact that the mystery of God transcends all categories of knowing, including those of masculine and feminine.”² By expanding our language

¹ <http://www.episcopalchurch.org/library/glossary/inclusive-language>

² Griswold, Frank, Preface to Enriching Our Worship, p. 5

of God, we expand our knowledge of God. The introduction states, “The goal was to employ evocative language which would lead worshipers deeper into the mystery of God.”³

At the same time, what we believe about God also affects what we believe about people. Language has power, and the wrong use of language regarding God will also diminish God’s people. For instance, a belief that God is male, or white, or straight, or of the right socio-economic class has at times historically created a belief that people that do not fit these categories are not as valuable to God. Usually people believe that humanity must match the prevailing vision of the Divine, so it is common that those in power make God look an awful lot like them! This creates a limited vision of the Almighty, which in turn encourages beliefs such as: women are secondary to men, or white people are superior to all other races, or gay people are going to hell, or God especially loves Americans, or that personal wealth indicates God’s favor. On the contrary, in 1 Samuel 16:7b it says, “The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.” Rather than having God look like us, God will be who God will be. At the same time, we will find the whole wild diversity of humanity reflected in the radiance of Her glory. The fuller the expression of God, the more accurate it will be.

When I was in seminary I wrote a paper on the images of Christ on the cross as found in art across the globe. Not surprisingly the Jesus by Italian artists looked Italian. The Jesus by Dutch artists looked Dutch. The Jesus by African artists looked African. The Jesus by South American artists looked South American. And so on! We tend to create God in our image. This

³ Introduction, Enriching our Worship, p. 9

is not wrong, just so long as we realize that the truth is we are created in God's image, and God is very, very big.

God is not male. God is not female. Rather, in 1 John [4:8, 12] we are told “God is love... No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.” This, then, is the crux of right belief about God and its impact on our beliefs about each other. God isn't male, that we should value men over women. Nor is God female, that we should value women over men. Rather God is love, so that we should love all people, regardless of our human limitations.

I want to reiterate what I said last week: if you have spent your whole life calling God “he,” and to change to calling God “she” would be a great challenge to your spiritual life, don't do it. God as male is not wrong. If it nurtures your relationship with the Divine, that is fine. It is one of the limitations of language. I would simply argue it is less right than mixing it up a bit. And if you are willing to use female pronouns and imagery for God, I encourage you to do so.

In the coming weeks and months I will experiment with some of the liturgies from Enriching our Worship and would appreciate feedback. In the meantime, feel free at the beginning of the service when you say, “And blessed be his kingdom, now and forever,” instead to say, “blessed be God's kingdom, now and forever.” Also, at the beginning of the Great Thanksgiving when you say, “It is right to give him thanks and praise” you may instead say “It is right to give God thanks and praise.”

As it says in Enriching our Worship: “The ultimate aim of expansive language experiments in Episcopal Church is to create a language of prayer for all God’s people.”⁴

A re-embracing of the Holy Spirit as the Divine Feminine, Wisdom, together with God the Father and the Son, does two things: it helps us experience greater spiritual insights about the Almighty, as well as helps us recognize the fullness of God’s love for all people. I will close with a vision written by the mystic St. Hildegard of Bingen in the 11th century, who recognized Sophia, Wisdom, as the Holy Spirit, the godhead present at the beginning of creation:

“I heard a voice saying to me, ‘This Lady whom you see is Love, who has Her dwelling place in eternity. When God wished to create the world, He leaned down, and with tender Love, provided all that was needed, as a parent prepares an inheritance for a child. And thus, in a mighty blaze the Lord ordained all His works. Then creation recognized its Creator in its own forms and appearances. For in the beginning, when God said, ‘Let it be!’ and it came to pass, the means and the Matrix of creation was Love, because all creation was formed through Her as in the twinkling of an eye.”⁵

Amen.

⁴ Enriching our Worship, Introduction, p. 11.

⁵ The Holy Spirit as Sapientia (Wisdom/Creatrix), St. Hildegard von Bingen, trans. B. Newman (mod.), B. Newman, Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine (1987), <http://www.wheeloftheyear.com/reference/hildegard.htm>, 1/23/15