

OCTOBER 2018 REFLECTIONS

Sisters and brothers of Grace Mennonite Church in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and God our Creator, who has shown us such love, and with abundant grace has given us such unfailing encouragement and so sure a hope, greetings!

I've been reflecting on a sermon on prayer I recently preached at Grace. In that sermon I made the comment that I think it would be ok to start the Lord's Prayer by saying "Our Mother in heaven" interchangeably with "Our Father in heaven," and that I think Jesus would be ok with that. Well you don't say something like that without raising a few questions. So I want to take this opportunity to share some further reflections about why I think this way.

First of all, I think we can probably all agree that God is beyond, or at least contains, all genderedness. In Genesis, chapter 1, there is this beautiful poem that describes the earth and all living things as a collection of dualities in harmonious and balanced relationship: light/dark, land/water-firmament, sun/moon-stars, plants/animals, birds/fish, male/female, and so forth. All of these balanced, harmonious dualities flow forth from God's own self, that is, the creative Divine, and so represent the qualities of the Divine mind and character. Finally, Genesis teaches us that human beings are made in God's very own image and likeness, male and female, with tremendous creative energy and potential. This Genesis poem that describes how God created everything gives the impression that God is not so much beyond gender as much as God contains all the qualities of both genders and all dualities in perfect balance and harmony. It takes two humans to create another human, but God can create anything by simply speaking it into being.

Whether we want to say that God is beyond gender and sexuality or God contains all gender and sexuality, I think we can all get on board with the concept that God is neither or both "he" and/or "she." But what do we do when language fails to capture this concept, and why does it matter? First of all, language is a miraculous and incredibly useful, but limited tool. Second, the language we use helps to shape our understanding of the way things are.

Language enables us not only to describe the concrete things we observe with our physical senses, but to share with one another abstract and complex ideas, thoughts, emotions, and spirituality. However, like most of the rest of creation, many languages are highly gendered. In English, "he" is a masculine pronoun, "she" is a feminine pronoun and "it" and "they" are neuter (that is, gender neutral) pronouns. So shall we call God "he" or "she" interchangeably? Can we mix it up now and then by tossing in an "it" or "they" (after all, God is a Trinity) when we speak of God? And does it even matter? Since we know that "he," "him," and "father" are simply language-limited stand-ins for the larger concept of God, then why does it matter if we simply start the Lord's Prayer with "Our Father ..." every time, especially since that's how the church has been doing it for about two thousand years?

Because language matters. Like God, who created the whole material world through spoken words, we who are created in God's image create our experience of reality through the words we choose to name it (like when Adam named all the animals that God had created). This is especially true when we speak devotionally through prayer, song, and poetry. So if we always refer to God as "him," "he," and "Father," we actually begin to conceptualize God as masculine, even though we know deep down that these words are only stand-ins for the larger concept. When we begin conceptualizing God mostly as masculine, the Sacred Feminine – an absolutely indispensable part of any faith tradition, especially Christianity – is lost and the whole is diminished in ways that can become catastrophic. One only needs to consult the daily news headlines, or attend to the ongoing struggle in our culture to deal with toxic masculinity, or poke around in the darker corners of Church history to see the very real effects of speaking into reality a world created by a male god.

But don't we pray, "Our Father" because Jesus teaches us to pray it this way in the Scriptures? Yes and no. Jesus was also constrained by the limits of human language when trying to communicate to first century Palestinians about Divine realities. I believe that when Jesus taught his first disciples to pray this way, he was tapping into a specific conceptual framework in the Jewish scriptures; a framework of intimacy, provision and protection. I don't think Jesus was purposefully tapping into notions of genderedness. But didn't God come to earth as Jesus, who was male? Yes. But think; first century near eastern culture was so male-dominated, would God have made it very far as a woman or a hermaphrodite? Probably not. Plus, I like to think that God came as the man, Jesus, in order to transform the location of power in that time and place (maleness) from domination to servanthood and submission. Additionally, Jesus spent his ministry on earth dismantling conceptual boundaries like he/she, in/out, us/them in order to expand peoples' understanding of the Divine. This is something in which the Apostle Paul follows suit in some of his most important letters in the New Testament.

So if language fails but how we speak matters, what then shall we do? My suggestion is to use our God-given imagination; get creative. You will often hear me referring to God as "Creator" in prayer and from the pulpit. I do this purposefully to evoke a mental picture of the Divine as containing all the possible elements of genderedness and creativity. I still often refer to Jesus as "our Lord and Savior" to remind me that the presiding United States president is not my Lord, nor is our military or economy the savior of my life and protector of my values. And, yes, you might just hear me kick off the Lord's Prayer with "Our Mother" once in a while, if you listen hard.

Until next month, grace and peace. And may the Lord Jesus Christ and God our Creator be with you.

Pastor Matthew