

Genesis 12:1-9
Matthew 6:7-15

Elohim, Nursing Mother, Yahweh, She Bear, Adonai, Daddy, El Shaddai

On the Last Thursday in January, several of us at Ark and Dove attended the 827th meeting of the Presbytery of Baltimore. 827 That's a lot of meetings. The Presbyterian Church has been ministering in North America since the 1600's and the Presbytery of Baltimore has been guiding ministry since 1786. Presbyteries are governing bodies that coordinate ministry in a given geographical area. Our Presbytery stretches from Western Maryland, East to Havre De Grace and south to Crofton. One of the things Presbyteries do is ordain ministers. Before you can be ordained, you must attain a Master of Divinity Degree at a Seminary, Pass Ordination Exams and Present and defend an acceptable Statement of Faith at a Presbytery meeting.

Susan Quass presented her statement of faith at our 827th meeting. It was a strong statement that included this short portion. "I believe in the Trinity, a central Christian expression of the mystery of God. The Triune name, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, proclaims the ultimate being in a relationship of mutual love that affirms difference. This love is the model for how we are to be with God, with one

another and with all creation. I believe in one God, Mother of us all, the beginning and the end, the wellspring of life, and the divine source and maker of all that was, that is, and that will be.”¹

An Elder from Grove Presbyterian Church in Aberdeen took exception to the phrase “Mother of us all”. He was rude. He was arrogant and as part of his protest, he asked Susan to recite the Lord’s Prayer. Susan invited us all to pray together and so we did. The elder from Grove wanted to make Susan call God Father. Susan did very well in defending her statement of faith and she was approved for ordination by a huge margin. A tense moment passed and the meeting continued; but what do you think was up with the elder from Grove? I think he was scared that a potential minister would use the word Mother to describe God. His assumptions about God were challenged. His image of God was questioned. His picture of God was disturbed. His sense of orthodoxy was upended. This burst of creativity on the part of Susan probably hurt him and so he reacted in anger and retreated into the arms of his old familiar friend the Lord’s Prayer.

¹ Susan Quass, My Faith Statement, 827 Meeting Papers of the Presbytery of Baltimore, <http://www.baltimorepresbytery.org/whitebooks/documents/827PresbyterofBaltoStatedMeetingVB.pdf>

When Jesus was teaching his disciples about prayer he offered them a pattern of Prayer. His words were recorded in Mathew and Luke and we have come to call these words the Prayer of Jesus, the Lord's Prayer or the Our Father. We are praying and studying the Lord's Prayer in this church for the forty days of Lent. The sermons are about the Lord's Prayer and many of us are reading a Book called Praying like Jesus by James Mulholland. Almost one third of our adults are in small discussion groups on this topic.

This week we are focusing on the Phrase Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. I have suggested to us all that we pray the Lord 's Prayer twice a day and that we say it slowly so the meaning of the words can perhaps transform us. I have become aware over the years that not all people understand the words hallowed be thy name. People understand praying to our Father God. People understand that heaven is God's realm and a special place but hallowed or hallowed is not in our everyday language. Hallowed means holy; God's name is holy. Or better yet God is Holy. God is Special. God is mysterious, wonderful, omnipotent, awesome, powerful and to be respected. God is my friend. God does love me;

but God is huge beyond my imagining and so I revere and worship our hallowed God.

The Maori indigenous people of New Zealand translated the beginning of the Lord's Prayer in this manner: "Eternal Spirit, Earth-Maker, Pain-bearer, Life-giver, source of all that is and that shall be, Father and Mother of us all. Loving God, in whom is heaven. The hallowing of your name echoes through the universe!"² The pattern of the Lord's Prayer is preserved but our images of God are expanded and our proclamations of the holiness of God are so heart felt they echo around the universe. After the morning prayer today, please join me in this version of the Lord's Prayer which we will project on screen. Our hope here is that by praying an old friend with fresh words that windows of faith will be opened for our hearts.

When Jesus was a rabbi people were so respectful of God that they were afraid to say God's name. At least that was the official teaching. In fact they believed that something bad might very well happen to you if you ever uttered God's name. God darn that's a far cry from the way people treat God's name these days. Oh God I can't believe how often people abuse God's name. Oh my God it is

² From the New Zealand Book of Common Prayer

just ridiculous. God Almighty you probably hardly notice that I just broke the third commandment four times. Different cultures and people in different times face different challenges. We drop the God Bomb all the time in our culture. We are very casual about God's name. We don't even correct our children because we might very well be labeled hypocritical if we did. We are not much worried about saying God's name at all.

In Jesus' day the people weren't allowed to say Yahweh. The common words used for God were Lord Adonai and King Melek. Anywhere the Bible said Yahweh the people were taught to substitute the word Adonai. Think about how these words King and Lord may have affected the ancient Jews. The average person never ever saw the king, certainly not the Emperor from Rome and they had to show extreme deference to any lords in their life; bowing, scraping the like. The average person would be scared of anyone with the title Lord or King. All the priests kept praying to God the King and God the Lord. God felt so very far away, so inaccessible God felt dangerous and so Jesus encouraged his disciples to call God Daddy. Jesus encouraged his disciples to get closer to God. This just the knocked the socks off of everyone. This was very unusual. Our Rabbi Jesus

wants us to call God Daddy. “Mom are you sure?” – I’ll bet the children asked. This was great stuff. This was fresh thinking. This was mind blowing faith building breakthrough teaching from the Source. Jesus was shaking it up.

James Mullholland has some appropriate words for the elder from Grove Presbyterian Church. “Those who vehemently argue for the title “God the Father” miss the point. Jesus was not interested in replacing one rigid title with another. He was defining our relationship with God in a new way. Claiming God as a parent was far more than sentimental fantasy. In so doing, Jesus was challenging how we perceive God. For Jesus, God was the father we cry out for when we awake in the darkness, in the grip of a nightmare. God was the mother who dries our tears and kisses away our pain when we fall and skin our knee. God was a parent intimate, loving and committed.”³

Sometimes you get in a rut. Sometimes you get so used to doing something a certain way or thinking about a certain something in a certain category that you are blocked by your familiarity. We have all heard the phrase think outside the box. Taco Bell wants us

³ Praying Like Jesus by James Mulholland, Harper San Francisco, 2001 page 34

to think outside the bun; outside the hamburger bun. Maybe we say the "Our Father" prayer so often, we forget that there are many other images for God in scripture. Female images for God in the Bible are not super abundant but neither are they rare. The Bible says in Genesis that we are made in God's image, male and female. Hosea 11 describes God as mother like. Hosea 13 describes God as a mother bear, Deuteronomy 32 as a Mother eagle and as the One who gave birth to us. Isaiah 66 describes God as comforting mother, Isaiah 49 a nursing mother, Isaiah 42 a woman in labor, Jeremiah describes God as the Queen of Heaven (Jer 44:25) John 1 and I John 4 as giving birth and Jesus describes God as a mother hen and as a woman looking for a lost coin.

The Bible is rich with imagery for God. God is described in hundreds of different ways in scripture. Father, Lord, King, Yahweh, Rock, Adonai, Thunder, El Berith, Wind, Elohim, Ancient of days, Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer. Human language reaches its limits when it attempts to describe God, or even to capture the experience of the encounter with the one who is both radically other and immediately present. Anthropomorphic language that is language that uses human attributes to describe God is handy because in its affinity God is

encountered as personal. But such language, such concrete and mortal language must not be taken literally as descriptive of God, and it must be balanced with the language of otherness.

The hand of God that covered the eyes of Moses when he was up on Mount Sinai, I think bears no physical resemblance to this appendage with which I wave. Would hand's that formed a Universe be so small? Would God even need a hand to block our eyesight when God simply by speaking created a world?

Human language can actually shrink God and limit God. Human words package God into square boxes of linear human thought that can be unpacked and repacked as necessary in a life of faith. This is practical for purposes of discussion and for teaching. It gives our puny human minds something to wrap themselves around, but to restrict Language about God or to think about God only in terms of language is to mold God into an idol. God will always resist such trivial censorship. God will explode these boxes and speak to us in flowing music, grand architecture, the passionate love we have for other people, the plot of poignant parables, in the beauty and intricacy of creation and in the brilliant colors of art laid down in inspired conception to paint praises to God's limitlessness and indefinability. Our God comes closer than

words viewed on paper or sputtered from a pulpit. We should not be afraid when people try to describe our God in innovative ways. We should take new words for a test drive, kick the tires and decide whether we want to buy, pray or praise. Jesus was encouraging us to get close to God in prayer by using the word Abba or Daddy for God. Jesus was encouraging us to respect God's holiness by using the phrase hallowed be thy name. The pattern of the Lord's Prayer beckons us to intimacy with God our parent. The Pattern of the Lord's Prayer invites to reverence and regard for the Master of the Universe. When we approach God with childlike trust, with personal peace and with giant portions of respect; then we are ready to continue our prayers.