

## **Are You My Father?** Sunday, 6/16/19

**1** In the year before I was born, 1960, P.D. Eastman first published his classic early reader book, “Are You My Mother?” So naturally, I grew up hearing it, reading it, and then doing the same with my children. Did any of you do the same? I don’t have grandchildren yet, but I’m hopeful that day will come as well. It’s the simple story of a baby bird who falls out of the nest after hatching and then goes in search of his mother, who is away from the nest seeking worms. Neither the cat, the dog, the cow, nor the steam shovel gave the baby bird the hoped-for answer when he looked at them and said, “Are you my mother?”

As I look at the book again, I wonder. If it had been written in 2019, couldn’t it just as easily have been written as the story of a wayward chick looking for her father? After all, mothers don’t have a monopoly on nurturing their children, do they? In a similar way, when we read our baptism liturgy this morning, we said, “We commit to do our best to nurture you like a mother, to protect you like a father, to encourage you like a brother, and to comfort you like a sister.” Most of us understand that fathers can nurture as well, mothers can protect, sisters can encourage, and brothers can comfort.

Often we prefer to pick a gender when we generalize because it feels so impersonal to speak in the abstract; to say, for example, “parent” instead of “mother” or “father.” Sometimes we pick a gender because it’s awkward and wordy to constantly say things like “his or her, she or he.” Sometimes getting the specific gender is important, but many other times we let someone’s gender limit our conception of what they can or can’t, should or shouldn’t do. And that’s a problem, because God created us all in God’s image. God did create us “male and female,” but each generation tends to import its own views of what exactly that means. A member of a church I previously served was seriously upset when I made the coffee in the morning for her Bible study, instead of insisting that one of our female administrative assistants make the coffee! That ended in the ‘70’s, didn’t it?

The language we use and our underlying assumptions about gender roles can also have a profound impact on our understanding of God. I’m going to show you a provocative music video now to challenge you a bit in your understanding of God, including gender, but even more broadly than that. I’m giving you a head’s up, because I don’t want you to become derailed by the details of the video. The main idea is that God’s identity is bigger

than any of the boxes we try it contain it with, like gender and politics. When the band sings, “God is not a man,” we could just as easily sing, “God is not a woman.” When the band sings, “[God is not] a Republican,” we could just as easily sing “God is not a Democrat or Independent.” Are you with me? Be watching and listening now for ways that you, or the culture you live in, has limited the identity of God though language and attitudes. {TECH:

Show video: “White Man” (03:19)}

I did warn you that it’s provocative. Whenever you hear me say, “God is not an old white man sitting on a cloud,” now you know the images and the sound track running through my mind!

**2** How many of you have watched “Father Knows Best?” Is it still being offered on cable? In this television program from the 50’s, the father of the family, Jim Anderson, was the wise figure whose role was to come home from work and dole out advice to his children in the midst of their nonstop predicaments in life. I wonder if that’s the image many of us have of God, the wise father who we’re waiting for to come home and clean up the messes we make.

Much of our understanding of gender norms comes from our families of origin and the times we grew up in. Tragically, sometimes our gender and family role concepts come from experiences of abuse or dysfunction. When we talk about God as a father, sometimes we make the mistake of importing everything we know about our imperfect human fathers and attributing the same imperfections to God. Quite the opposite is what’s intended in the Bible. Our image of ideal fatherhood should come from the very best of what we know about God’s character, which includes, by the way, wisdom. So even if the fathers you have known haven’t been especially wise, you can be confident that your Heavenly Father really does know best.

**3** What does it mean for us to address God as our Father, as Jesus clearly did many times and we still do every time we pray the Lord’s Prayer? This is Michelangelo’s famous depiction of God as a stern looking gray-haired man. For many, that image remains the primary way they picture God. It’s true that God’s character can be stern in the application of justice, but the Bible describes God in many other ways as well, not just stern, masculine ones. Some of those names for God we read in this morning’s Call to Worship: Creator,

Redeemer, Sustainer, the Alpha and Omega, Ancient of Days, and Bright Morning Star. I love that last one in particular from Revelation 22:16: Bright Morning Star.

The names we use to address God reflect something of who we see God to be. Addressing God with other names, such as “Bread of Life,” “Shepherd,” or “Refuge” can help us to exercise a more balanced understanding of the nature of God. I have to be honest and say that I have a hard time using feminine pronouns for God. Mostly that’s because Jesus was incarnated as a man and he referred God as his Father, and so the Bible is full of male pronouns in reference to God. But there are feminine images of God in the Bible. Take, for example, Isaiah 49:14-15: “Jerusalem says, ‘The LORD has deserted us; the Lord has forgotten us.’ ‘Never! Can a mother forget her nursing child? Can she feel no love for the child she has borne? But even if that were possible, I would not forget you!’”<sup>1</sup> Or again in Isaiah 66:12: “I will comfort you there in Jerusalem as a mother comforts her child.”<sup>2</sup>

Jesus himself used a feminine image of God when he said in Luke 13:34: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones God’s messengers! How often I have wanted to gather your children together as a hen protects her chicks beneath her wings, but you wouldn’t let me.”<sup>3</sup>

**4** The picture of God that’s conveyed in the Bible is a surprisingly large and complex mosaic of images and analogies, and no matter how hard we try to describe God in human word pictures, we inevitably fall short. That’s why a healthy diet of Bible reading, including many different parts of the Bible, can be so important to our understanding of God. On this Father’s Day, I challenge you to think a little out of the box in using words and images to address God that aren’t exclusively male. You might get some inspiration by cracking open your Bible and reading a book that you’ve neglected or are less familiar with. And remember, ultimately God’s name is whatever God makes of it: “I am Yaweh”, God says in Exodus 3:14- “I am who I am.”

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<sup>1</sup> New Living Translation (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Ibid



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