

Mother God

Stephen Van Kuiken
North Congregational U.C.C.
Columbus, OH
May 14, 2023

The compassion of God the Mother insures that she loves the weak and dispossessed as well as the strong and beautiful. We do not have to be wonderful according to external norms to elicit her love, for this is freely given by virtue of the maternal relationship itself. God looks upon all with a mother's love that makes the beloved beautiful. Human persons cannot earn or merit this love, but it is freely and abundantly given.

—Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is*

God Almighty is our natural Father; God All-wisdom is our natural Mother. —Julian of Norwich

Ancient Witness: Jeremiah 31:20

My focus today is: When we speak about God, what images are good? What language is right? This is a treacherous thing to do, since so often our own agendas and self interests and prejudices get in the way. There's an old adage that has been traced back to Voltaire: "In the beginning God created human beings in God's image, and we have been returning the favor ever since."

A good place to start is to recognize *the limitations of all human language*. In the 40th chapter of Isaiah, the prophet struggles to speak to a defeated and despairing people who found themselves in exile in Babylon. And there is a shocking reversal of the warrior image of God. Instead, God is compared to a shepherd who is most concerned for the weakest of the flock, the mothers and the babies.

Then there is this series of rhetorical questions used to speak about the incomparable nature of God:

*Who meted out the waters with the cupped hand,
and measured the heavens with the span?
Contained in a third cup the dust of the earth,
and weighed in a scale the mountains,
heights with balance weights? (40:12)*

The answer is obvious: It was God and nobody else. And then come some more questions:

*To whom then will you liken God?
And to what likeness will you compare God?*

*To whom shall you liken me and I shall resemble?
Says the Holy One. (40:18, 25)*

Again, the answers to the questions are obvious: *God cannot be fully compared to anyone or anything*. Even the stars, worshipped as divine powers in Babylon, are recipients of God's care; God

calls them all by name. God is not named; rather, God does the naming. God transcends human comprehension and the human capacity to render God in human language.

In the book of Exodus, we have Moses being called to be a major part of the liberation of the Hebrew people. Moses resists, and he asks,

*When I come to Israel's children...
and they ask me:
What is his name,
What shall I tell them?*

*God said to Moses:
"I will be who I will be."*

Now the early Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible is translated into English as "I am who I am." The Hebrew verb form used here, however, would be ordinarily translated with a future tense: "I will be" rather than "I am."

But the implication here is that *it is impossible to name God*. God cannot be captured in a name. As biblical theologian, Johanna Bos writes:

It was, for Moses, a good beginning point; it is a good beginning point for us. It is also a point of which we need to be reminded constantly; the only "wrong" naming of God is that which is sure of having it "right."

In the Hebrew scriptures, Israel used a proper name for God, which is transliterated with the four consonants, "YHWH," usually translated as "LORD" in the English versions and as "LORD GOD" when found in combination with *Elohim*, the generic word, "God." Ancient Israel's practice was to write the name with consonants only, and at some time they stopped pronouncing the name of God, and only the consonants remained. This word occurs more than 6,000 times in the Bible. Jewish believers would not even entertain the notion of trying to pronounce the sacred name and find it deeply offensive and blasphemous when others attempt to do so. *We all would do well to remember that the proper name of God is unpronounceable*. Even our most precise and careful language of God is a wild approximation, an analog to the great Mystery and incomprehensible Reality.

And so the question is: If all speaking of God is flawed, then how do we speak of God? It seems to me, we need to be aware always that language for God is always language of *comparison* and not of *identification*. And so the ancient texts show us the necessity for *many titles* and images for God instead of identifying God with just one or a few images. For example, one of the comparisons of God in the Bible is to a father. But as theologian, Sallie McFague observes,

By excluding other relationships as metaphors, the model of father become idolatrous, for it comes to be viewed as a description of God.

And so there is a problem when we think that there is only one image for God, even if it's the vaguest possible language. In order to be inclusive, it needs to be *expansive*.

But historically, the majority of Christianity, Judaism and Islam have used exclusively male language, so that this image of God has moved from *metaphor* to the status of *fact*. It has become literalized. And this masculine imagery has supported a definition of religious authority that

excluded women and assigned them to subordinate status. As the feminist theologian Mary Daly said, “If God is male, male is god.” Even today, the church is complicit in the sin of promoting male domination by using exclusively male imagery for God. Carol Christ writes,

As long as a woman prays to a male God, she can never have the experience that is freely available to every man and boy in her culture, of having her full identity affirmed as being in the image and likeness of God.

Make no mistake, *men* need the Mother image of God, too. Patriarchy affects us all. The assumption of male dominance, of a hierarchical view of things, of power over others, contributes to discord, violence and warfare. The idea of the nurturing, comforting Mother God is sorely needed. And mothering itself is beyond biology and gender.

About 15 years ago I did a baptism for a little boy named Cooper. And we all saw in our congregation how he and his nine brothers were all receiving the beautiful mothering that they needed from their parents, Clint and Bryan, two gay men. God as mother can help release us from the tyranny of cultural stereotypes and stunted human development. Real men are good mothers. Jesus was like that, comparing himself to a mother hen, saying, “O Jerusalem, how often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings!”

The sacred texts affirm many images of God, who is compared to a bear, a lion, a rock, a brook, a wall, and a mountain. And, appropriate on Mother’s Day, God is compared to many feminine images as well. *But the church, by and large, has forgotten its own tradition!*

Beginning with the writer of Genesis: “God created humankind in God’s image... male *and female* God created them.” (1:27)

There is the image of God as the *mother eagle*, as she would swoop down and catch her young. (Deuteronomy 32:11)

The Hebrew word, *ruach*, means “breath,” “wind,” and when linked to God is translated “spirit,” and it has a feminine gender, describing the life-giving and empowering experience of God. *Shekinah*, who, in Judaism, was the indwelling presence of God in humankind, and often called the feminine face of God.

There is also the image of God as *Wisdom*. *Sophia* is the Greek word for wisdom, and she appears as a female figure in the Hebrew Scriptures in Proverbs and Job. “Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace,” says Proverbs 3:17.

And finally, there is the image of God as *a mother*:

*Like a woman in labor I scream,
I gasp and strain all at once.* (Isaiah 42:13)

*As a mother comforts a child
so I will myself comfort you.* (Isaiah 66:13)

How appropriate it is that we have a civil holiday that has its roots in disarmament to counter the bloody violence we have projected upon God. In 1870 Julia Ward Howe, famous for writing “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” issued a proclamation that is included in your bulletin that led to our

Mother's Day observance. It is a response to the carnage of the Civil War and an eloquent call for peace and for nonviolent conflict resolution "in the name of womanhood and of humanity." A generation later Anna Jarvis helped establish it as an official national holiday. (Jarvis would later regret this as she saw the holiday become lost in commercialism.) Throughout history women and mothers have been a voice for peace and for justice for workers, for children, and for the poor, calling for a more compassionate society.

We celebrate the caring and nurturing of human life that is, of course, beyond biology and not gender specific. But since women have been assigned almost total responsibility for children, most of us first know love and tenderness in the person of a woman.

Because of this, "mother" is a powerful metaphor for God! The phrase, "a face only a mother could love," points to the unconditional dedication of God toward humanity. In her book, *She Who Is*, New Testament scholar, Elizabeth Johnson, writes:

The compassion of God the Mother insures that she loves the weak and dispossessed as well as the strong and beautiful. We do not have to be wonderful according to external norms to elicit her love, for this is freely given by virtue of the maternal relationship itself. God looks upon all with a mother's love that makes the beloved beautiful. Human persons cannot earn or merit this love, but it is freely and abundantly given.

It has been noted that the word translated as "compassion" in the Hebrew, is the plural form of the word for "womb." So compassion means to be "womb-like." In today's ancient witness, according to the writer of Jeremiah, God says,

*Is Ephraim my dear son? My darling child?
For the more I speak of him,
the more I do remember him.
Therefore my womb trembles for him;
I will truly show motherly-compassion upon him. (31:20, trans. Phyllis Trible)*

Motherly-compassion is central to the Divine Presence. Jesus' famous statement, "Be merciful as God is merciful," is better translated, according to New Testament scholar Marcus Borg, as "Be compassionate as God is compassionate... be like a womb as God is like a womb. It is to feel as God feels and to act as God acts: in a life-giving and nourishing way." We are all called to have motherly-compassion toward the world. All people are made to act in life-giving and nourishing ways.

John Steinbeck, in his epic 1939 novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, documents the fall and rise of the Joad family, displaced by drought and forced West in search of viable jobs. At the end, when Rose of Sharon, the self-centered teenage daughter, has lost her baby in childbirth, the family must face another crisis. But this time it's somebody else's crisis.

In the midst of a heavy storm, they seek shelter in an old barn. There, huddling in the corner, they find a young boy and his sick father. The gaunt man has not eaten in six days. Even though the boy stole bread for him, he could not keep it down. He needs milk, but the Joads have no money.

"Hush," Ma said. "Don't worry. We'll figger somepin out."

Suddenly the boy cried, "He's dyin', I tell you! He's starvin' to death, I tell you."

“Hush,” said Ma. She looked at Pa and Uncle John standing helplessly gazing at the sick man. She looked at Rose of Sharon huddled in the comfort. Ma’s eyes passed Rose of Sharon’s eyes, and then came back to them. And the two women looked deep into each other. The girl’s breath came short and gasping.

She said, “Yes.”

Ma smiled. “I knowed you would. I knowed!” She looked down at her hands, tight-locked in her lap.

Rose of Sharon whispered, “Will—will you all—go out?”

The rain whisked lightly on the roof.

Ma leaned forward and with her palm she brushed the tousled hair back from her daughter’s forehead, and she kissed her on the forehead. Ma got up quickly. “Come on, you fellas,” she called. “You come out in the tool shed.”

Ruthie opened her mouth to speak. “Hush,” Ma said. “Hush and git.” She herded them through the door, drew the boy with her; and she closed the squeaking door.

For a minute Rose of Sharon sat still in the whispering barn. Then she hoisted her tired body up and drew the comfort about her. She moved slowly to the corner and stood looking down at the wasted face, into the wide frightened eyes. Then she slowly lay down beside him. He shook his head slowly from side to side. Rose of Sharon loosened one side of the blanket and bared her breast. “You got to,” she said. She squirmed closer and pulled his head close. “There!” she said. “There.” Her hands moved behind his head and supported it. Her fingers moved gently in his hair. She looked up and across the barn, and her lips came together and smiled mysteriously. (p. 618-619)

In the name of the one God and Mother of us all.

Mothers' Day Proclamation: Julia Ward Howe, Boston, 1870

Mother's Day was originally started after the Civil War, as a protest to the carnage of that war and a call to women to unite for disarmament. Its roots have been lost in a sea of sentimentality.

*Arise, then, women of this day!
Arise, all women who have hearts,
Whether our baptism be of water or of tears!*

Say firmly:

*“We will not have great questions decided by irrelevant agencies;
Our husbands will not come to us, reeking with carnage, for caresses and applause.
Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn
All that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy and patience.
We, the women of one country, will be too tender of those of another country
To allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs.”*

*From the bosom of the devastated Earth a voice goes up with our own.
It says: “Disarm! Disarm! The sword of murder is not the balance of justice.”
Blood does not wipe out dishonor, nor violence indicate possession.
As men have often forsaken the plough and the anvil at the summons of war,
Let women now leave all that may be left of home for a great and earnest day of counsel.
Let them meet first, as women, to bewail and commemorate the dead.
Let them solemnly take counsel with each other as to the means
Whereby the great human family can live in peace,
Each bearing after his own time the sacred impress, not of Caesar,
But of God.*

*In the name of womanhood and humanity, I earnestly ask
That a general congress of women without limit of nationality
May be appointed and held at someplace deemed most convenient
And at the earliest period consistent with its objects,
To promote the alliance of the different nationalities,
The amicable settlement of international questions,
The great and general interests of peace.*