

Ms. God

Genesis 1: 24-27

Today we are celebrating two events that mark for me the transition from summer to fall. First, this is the day of Crossroads' ninth annual *Sermon on the Mound* at the Field of Dreams. We worship God in the beauty of a natural setting and also celebrate the Labor Day holiday. Today also marks the conclusion of my summer sermon series—*Ask Jack* where “your questions become my content.”

Let me begin with a question of my own, “Why do we call nature Mother--Mother Nature?” I'm thinking there are basically two reasons. First, nature sustains and nurtures our lives—air, water, food—all we need to survive and to live. Most of us live out of touch with this most of the time. We think that water just comes from a faucet and food from a grocery store. But being in a natural setting here today, we are reminded that life all around us sustains our lives--all a gift of Creator.

Sustaining life is one reason to call nature “Mother.” Even more to the point is that nature is the source of life. Creation continues to create and Mother Nature is our mother. God is our creator--literally and figuratively giving birth to all of life—including us. Meister Eckhardt gave a great image of this when he wrote, “When we are born, heavens shouts “God is!” (as referenced by Elizabeth O'Connor in *Cry Pain, Cry Hope*).

This leads to the two “Ask Jack” questions for today.

- a. “My understanding is that the Bible never referred to God as feminine at best considered neutral. I'm all for equality and inclusion, but why do we "update" the Bible for political correctness (or do we)?”
- b. related question, Catholic and Protestant churches hold very different views regarding status of Mary, the mother of Jesus—openly revered by most Catholics and seldom mentioned in Protestant Churches. Why is that? Did Protestant founders elect to omit the veneration of Mary as a deliberate snub to Catholic values or did her status in Protestant churches just dwindle over time?

The first question asks essentially, “what's the justification for our using feminine images for God?” (ex. Mother God) Such an image is not in the Bible specifically, but the scripture lesson from Genesis 1:27 helps to provide some of that justification. The opening creation story in the Bible is from what is known as the priestly source from the Torah. This material seems to have been written originally as a litany for worship. It is highly structured in something of a parallel form.

- On the first day, God created light, then on the fourth day created the sun, moon, and stars that give and reflect the light.
- On the second day, God created the sky and sea, then on the fifth day created the life that flies and the life that swims in the sea.
- On the third day, God created the earth, the dry land, then on the sixth day created life for that dry land.

²⁴God said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.” And it was so. ²⁵God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good.

And then, God created people.

²⁶Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." ²⁷So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

God created everything in God's own image – and it was good! God created people in God's own image – male and female – and it was good! Our identity as women and men, feminine and masculine, reflects God. A famous book of prayers in the 1960's was, *Mr. God, This Is Anna*. It was a young girl's honest words to God whom she imaged as an older man. Our images of God are reflections of ourselves, our hopes, and even our fears. God is a *washerwoman* God, a black man, a mother, or a father. Our images for God reflect God's image in us. I'd like you to take a moment and think about what the most important God- image is for you? Why?

Moving on to the second "Ask Jack" question, "What about Mary?" In the New Testament, Mary is an important part of Jesus' network. As his mother, she cared for and nurtured him growing up. She was still a presence in his adult life and occasionally critical of his career choice! Evidently, she was also present at his execution, a scene beautifully depicted in Michelangelo's *Pietà*. But in the New Testament, Mary was clearly and only a human being.

An understanding of Jesus' divinity grew during the first several centuries of the Christian Church's existence. There was a similar growth in the interpretation of Mary. According to legend, she was taken directly, body and soul, into heaven at her death. The veneration of Mary increased, perhaps culminating in the doctrine of the *Immaculate Conception*. Pope Pius XII reinforced a divine role for Mary as late as 1950.

The Protestant Reformation returned to the New Testament and rejected all of the "Mary" development. They rejected it with a vengeance and sought to *purify* the faith. So, Protestantism was totally against any sense of Mary being more than human woman. Clearly, Catholicism is at different place on the issue of the Blessed Virgin Mary, even though belief in such doctrines as the Immaculate Conception are not held accepted as widely among Catholics today.

What do Catholics gain and lose from their emphasis of Mary? They gain a feminine presence in the community of God to match the masculine image reflected in Jesus. She is not part of the Trinity, but is more than human. Mary functions, to some extent, as a feminine face of God. They may consequently lose the need to struggle with the full humanity (male/female) represented by Jesus. The veneration of Mary may have, to some extent, allowed the Catholic Church to continue to limit the priesthood to males. This issue raises the need to take seriously the full spectrum of sexual identity (and orientation).

What do Protestants gain and lose from de-emphasizing Mary? They lose that feminine presence in the community of God. They also lose some connection with the theological development of much of the first Christian millennium as well as some common ground with their Catholic sisters and brothers. They gain a sense of the feminine presence as the Spirit (*pneuma, Sophia*). They also tend to see Jesus as encompassing both the masculine and feminine aspects of humanity. Many things have divided Catholic and Protestant dimensions of Christianity over the centuries and Mary theology symbolizes that division.

So what? Why is any of this important? To be honest, I'm not so sure that any particular view about the veneration of Mary is crucial. To those for whom praying to Mary is very meaningful, I believe those prayers are heard. To many of us for who that approach does not hold much

meaning, we are not harmed by the belief of others. I do believe, however, that the idea of how we image God is very important.

The biblical image for God is very clearly masculine. Do you wonder why that is, especially in light of Gen. 1:27—God's image reflecting both male and female? I understand that monotheism developed in reaction to polytheism in which the goddesses were the most powerful. They held the power to create life. In monotheism, God holds that creative power and tends to dominate the feminine.

What was the motive for that subjugation? It has been suggested that a powerful motive was fear of the creative power of the feminine. Monotheism tended to hold the reproductive process as unclean. Certainly the history of the Christian Church was to consider sexuality as evil and blame much of the world's downfall on women. In the present post-modern era, it may be time to reclaim the full value of both the feminine and the masculine. Our choice to emphasize God as feminine (not only mother) as well as masculine helps lead this way. It is a faith choice to view God as the source of both feminine and masculine.

Our images of God are extremely important. When the dominant image of God is judging, cruel, and punitive, the results are usually guilt, poor self-image, and often violence all the way to terrorism war. When the dominant image of God is loving, relational, accepting, and encouraging, the results are usually a sense of wholeness, self-acceptance, creatively working for mutual respect. The more our images of God encompass all the best of who we are as people, then the more we can access the full capacity of our humanity to shape this world in the image of God we come to know in wholeness and integrity.

The image of God we choose by faith reflects our own primary values. In my e-notes this week, I wrote about an exercise in which I was asked to name my top three values. My first reaction was to answer: justice, peacemaking, and love. With a little more reflection, three more concrete expressions of those values became clear to me. I realized that these values drive my priorities and my choices and I want to share them with you.

We are one, connected to God and each other. My well being really is tied to yours and yours to mine. Ultimately, my security will depend on your feeling secure. This is as true of the interdependence of nations as it is of persons. Seeking peace and justice is in our own self-interest. We live out of touch with this reality much of the time, yet it is still operational in our lives. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote in his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* (1963), "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." This is a faith issue. It may seem counter-intuitive. Logic says I must protect myself from you-- get mine before you take it away. The message of faith is that wholeness comes from letting go. Wealth comes giving away. Abundance comes from seeking the best for other people.

Build relationships that are not co-dependent. We all value building relationships. Our faith traditions underscore the importance of loving others. But many of our relationships foster more dependence than independence. This includes our relationships with church and with faith. God wants us to discover our strengths and take charge of our lives—to be full partners with God in shaping this world according to the values of peace, justice, compassion, and love. The more we wait for someone else to tell us we're "okay" and to solve our problems for us, the less likely we are to reach our full potential as people—to become the people God created us to be. And God has already pronounced us "good."

Clarity as to who I am and what I want—my identity and my direction. This may sound selfish, but it is the key to learning what God's calling is for my life. Discovering who I am reflects the process of spiritual growth, prayer, and faithful action. Little by little, I come to understand the image of God that my life reflects. Deciding what I want involves the process of spiritual discernment--discovering the hope and promise God has placed in me. Ultimately, what I want at the deepest level reflects what God wants for me.

These three values are concrete ways for me to understand and live the values of *Shalom*—peace, justice, compassion, and love—in my life. I believe these reflect the dream of God for this world. When we live our lives guided by our core values, we become fully human, faithful partners with God in bringing about God's purpose for all of creation.

My values really do drive my life. They're why I'm a pastor – why I teach about how I understand God. They're why I value hearing your stories and listening to your concerns and questions. They're why I invest time in peace, justice, missions events, in Sunday School, in theater ministry, and in music. They're why I invest time in the organization More2 working to reshape KC in direction of justice, peace, and love.

I've shared my core values today in order to ask you to think about yours. I challenge you this morning to decide what values determine your life. Make your own list because those values are already active in your life. Then ask yourself—"Are they worthy of my life?" Are they? If not, then pray for clarity and the courage to choose the values that you want to drive your life. If your core values are worthy of you and the investment God is making in you, then pray for the courage and will to live them out with intention and clarity.

Eternal God, source of our lives and our identities has women and men, girls and boys, strengthen the sense of justice and compassion, the desire for peace, and the capacity to forgive within us. Lead us to nurture the divine love that grows in our hearts. Give us the clarity and courage to choose to value what you value. Give us the courage and the will to let these values drive our lives so that we will live in this world as signs of your presence and your nature. Open our minds as well as our hearts to recognize your image in nature and in other people—and to let your life shine through us in the power of your Spirit. Amen.