

Welcome and Reminders

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Prayer and Praises

Introduction

The term "Inclusive Language" creates some contrasting reactions in the environment of Metropolitan Community Churches. Newer attendees may have never heard of it, veterans of the fellowship protect it without regard, some adamantly refuse to call God anything but "He," others refuse to call God "He," and then there are many who just stumble through it full of respect mixed with confusion. The individual churches are just as diverse as the people who attend them both in understanding and opinion of inclusifying the identity of God. In this study we will discuss inclusive language directed specifically in understanding and communication of the identity of God.

- What is your understanding of inclusive language in terms of referring to God?
- What is your opinion of inclusive language in terms of referring to God?

The Non-Gender All Gender God

First of all, let's start with the obvious. God is not a physical entity with human or even human-like anatomy. God does not have genitalia, sexual organs, chromosomes, or hormones. There is no obvious identifier, other than Scripture, that tells us God's gender identity, and Scripture tells us more than many people pay attention to. It is clear, in terms of how we commonly identify our own gender, that God is not a gender at all. Having said that, it is also clear through

Scripture and relationship with God, that God is so much more than an 'it' or an impersonal unidentifiable being.

Read Genesis 1:26-26, paying very close attention to the underlined words below:

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." So God created humankind in God's own image, in the image of God, God created them; male and female God created them.

In our image... this certainly creates a plural image of God that doesn't quite substantiate "the big man in the sky" view. Although we will talk more later about the different parts of the triune Godhead, for the moment we can, at the least, agree that God is more than a single image, a single identity, or a single understanding of what we might have. In that image of God – the 'our image' – humanity was created. In that image of God – the 'our image' – male and female were created. It is that image of God that allows us to understand and see God as an 'all gender' God.

Now let's read this translation of I Kings 18:17-21, which is a rendering done by Rev. Jeff Pulling of Metropolitan Community Church in the Valley, utilizing several contemporary English translations.

When King Ahab saw the prophet Elijah, Ahab said to him, "Is that you, you troubler of Israel?" Elijah replied, "I have not troubled Israel, but you have, you and your father's family. You have forsaken the commandments of the living God YAH-WEH and followed Baal. Now summon all the people of Israel to meet me on Mount Carmel, and the 450 prophets of Baal with them, and the 400 prophets of the goddess A-she-rah, who eat at Queen Jezebel's table.

So Ahab called all Israel together and assembled the prophets on Mount Carmel. Elijah went before all the people and said, "How long will you waver between two different opinions? If YAH-WEH is God, follow YAH-WEH. But if Baal is God, then follow Baal." And the people did not answer him a word.

The prophet Elijah confronts his hearers: "If YAHWEH is God, then follow YAHWEH. If Baal is God, then follow Baal." Elijah asks his hearers: "How long will you waver between two different opinions?" How long will you go limping between two different conceptions of God? How long will you straddle the fence? Is it YAHWEH or Baal?

In this story we see two very distinctive gods mentioned: Baal and YAHWEH.

The Canaanite god, Baal, was definitely a male. He was worshiped as a fertility deity who had sexual relations with female deities to bring about the fertility of the land, the livestock, and the

people. The shrines used in the worship of Baal were large phallic symbols. And Baal was localized to a particular place and a particular people. In fact, there was not just one Baal, but many.

The Israelites, on the other hand, served YAHWEH. YAHWEH is a name of God that comes in the form of a verb rather than a noun. It can be translated to mean “I am who I am.” YAHWEH, the God of Israel, could not be limited by any name, category or image. Although the Israelite people tried to contain their God, refusing to see God as anything but their warrior, male only, general; Yahweh God would not be limited.

YAHWEH kept bursting out of the boxes into which they put their God. YAHWEH would not stay on the neat shelf compartment in which they placed their God. Through the prophets, YAHWEH kept surprising people and challenging them to grow and expand in their conception of God and God's will. YAHWEH is boundless, eternal, and universal. YAHWEH is beyond gender, beyond nationality, beyond race, beyond any time and place.

As much as I cerebrally know that the Christian church today serves YAHWEH, I so often look at or listen to the images put forth by that same church and am forced to admit that it sounds a lot more like Baal. While I know we don't have phallic-like churches and we don't promote sexual relations to bring about fertility in the land, we do restrict God to certain identities, specific functions and allotted times.

Discussion

- Regardless of your perspective on inclusive language, can you think of a place in the realms of your opinions or theologies where you have put God in a box? Why, do you think, it is so difficult to see beyond your specific view?

From the extreme contrasting opinions of inclusive language I have seen a boxed up God. Looking back to the introduction of this week – I believe it is easy for those who refuse inclusive language to see God as anything but a male figure and those who embrace inclusive language to reject the male image of God. The next two weeks will talk about embracing both the feminine and masculine characteristics of God

- With consideration to where you are on the scale of inclusive language – from demonstrative support to dismissive subversion – can you put your preconceptions on hold for this study and seek to find an even greater and more boundless image of God?
- How do you feel about embracing the feminine character of God?
- How do you feel about embracing the masculine character of God?
- Share any final thoughts that tonight's discussion may have prompted.

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Prayer and Praises

Introduction

Last session we introduced the idea of an all gender/non-gender God. God, who really exists as spirit, cannot be isolated to the literal male female definitions. God is both male and female and yet so far beyond the boundaries of male and female. This session we will refer to the feminine attributes of God seen in the Bible.

The Maternal God

One of the many names of God, El Shaddai, has been commonly translated as God Almighty or the sustainer of life. Its literal translation is the breasted one. Obviously, as already noted, God does not have physical body parts. Nevertheless, this imagery of God is profoundly feminine and one that carries significance in our quest to gain further understanding of who God is... A God who nourishes, a God who nestles, a God who sustains life. Additionally, Yahweh (YHWH) is persistently described as the giver of birth, even as the midwife of human life, and even or most poignantly when fertility of the womb is withheld. In the book of Isaiah alone we can read images of God as a mother in labor (42:14), a mother nursing a child (49:14-15), a mother comforting her children (66:12-13), a mother birthing and protecting her children (46:3-4). And beyond Isaiah the images continue:

*"it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms, but they did not know that I healed them. I was to them like those who lift infants [lit., suckling children] to their cheeks [OR: who ease the yoke on their jaws]; I bent down to them and fed them."
(NRSV) Hosea 11:1-4*

For further reference, other maternal references for God can be found in the following scriptures: Num. 11:12, Dt. 32:18, Ps. 131:2; Job. 38:8, 29; Prov. 8:22-25; 1 Pet. 2:2-3, Acts 17:2

- I heard described that the imagery of "The Breasted One" can bring about thoughts of being nestled against the warm and life giving breasts of the Lover and Life-giver that is God. How does this resonate with you?

God, the Working woman

There are also many scriptures that show God in the place of traditionally female roles (Keep in mind, as Scripture was being written these roles were completely gender-based). In Neh. 9:21 we see God as a seamstress making clothes for Israel to wear. In Psalms 22:9-10 God is a midwife. God works leaven into bread in Luke 13:18-21. Finally, in Luke 15:8-10 we can read the story of the woman seeking a lost coin, a parable God used to describe God searching for the lost soul.

- Do these images make any difference in how you view God? Is so, how?

God the Holy Spirit

Perhaps the most significant understanding of God comes through understanding of the trinity: God the Father*, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit (but that's a whole other CARE group study). It seems, so often that God the Father gets top billing and the remaining two have to be worked into ones understanding of God. In reality, all three parts of the God-head are essential, necessary, and balanced. It is obvious that Jesus (the Son) came to the Earth as a man – the one instance where God did have sexual organs and could be identified as one gender. But that does not mean that the remainder of the godhead is only male.

The part of the Godhead often referred to as God the Father or, more often in MCC, God the Creator, is given both masculine and feminine names. The term "Spirit", on the other hand, translates the Hebrew word "Ruah" (Rū-a) which in its primary sense means breath, air, wind. Ruah's Greek and Aramaic counterparts, "Pneuma" (Nū-ma) and "Shekinah" (sha-kī-na), are feminine words and imply a feminine divine presence. Could it be that the Holy Spirit is a

* (purposefully non-inclusified)

Christian Goddess rather than the often assumed mysterious invisible member of an all-male Trinity "club."

John 3:5-8

Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

In the above Scripture we can read Jesus' words referring to being born of the Spirit. If the experiences of the Holy Spirit are grasped as being a 'rebirth' or a 'being born anew', this suggests an image for the Holy Spirit which was quite familiar in the early years of Christianity, but lost in the more recent patriarchal translations of Scripture: *the image of the mother*. If believers are 'born' of the Holy Spirit, then we have to think of the Spirit as the 'mother' of believers, and in this sense as a feminine Spirit. If the Holy Spirit is the Comforter then she comforts as a mother comforts. In this case the Spirit is the motherly comforter of her children. Linguistically this brings out the feminine form of Yahweh's *ruach* in Hebrew.

- What significance does a maternal God bring to your life?

Goddess Renewed

It seems that the idea of a feminine God was not uncommon at the time Scripture was initially written down. Today the thought brings about discomfort and a sense of unfamiliarity for some. But perhaps when we begin to understand the depth of the trinity – we can make room for our Divine Mother in addition to our Heavenly Father.

- In the last session we talked about the box we so often put God in. How do the images of God discussed tonight fit within "your box?"
- On a scale from comforting to completely uncomfortable, how does the idea of praying to and seeking the wisdom of Goddess feel to you?
- Discuss any further thoughts or insights the study and discussion have prompted within you tonight.

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Introduction

Last two sessions we introduced the idea of an all gender/non-gender God, discussing a God who cannot be limited by the definitions of gender, but who has also created our gendered selves in the Devine's own image. We specifically discussed some of the female characteristics of God as seen in scripture during our last session. This session we will contemplate the masculinity of God.

Father God

The first time I used a term of endearment to refer to my now wife I remember growing slightly red in the face, my heart pounded a little harder, and my breath grew shallow as I said, "Hey sweetie!" I wasn't sure how she would respond, but I used the term to show a deeper level of affection. Now I call her 'sweetie' or 'honey' more than I refer to her by name. But, sadly enough, it has become so common place that it seems it has lost the intimacy. I've often observed people praying to 'Father God' or referring to 'Father God' with such flippancy that I question if they even recognize that they have addressed God as father. It has become a term that has become too commonly adopted that I wonder if it sometimes loses the intimacy that God the Father deserves.

For me, one of the most intimate pictures of God throughout Scripture is found in Romans 8:15:

The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption. And to God we cry, "Abba, Father."

I understand that for some who are able to draw on the positive example of a father they had, this is a very reassuring and comforting image of God. For others, this is an image that associates abusive, absent or artificial images.

- Understanding that everyone's experience of father is different, what emotions and reactions does the image of father bring to you?

While the purpose of this study is not to focus on the restoration of the term father – positive imagery of a father has proven to be difficult for many people in our community. I found several quotes that I wanted to share because of the powerful way they addressed this issue.

"When speaking at a conference about the 'Inclusive Language of Religion,' two women approached me. The first said, 'I can't say The Lord's Prayer. It's too hurtful to call God Our Father. My father was an awful man. He hurt me. He hurt my mom. I can't think of God as a Father.' The other woman began to cry, 'That was my life, too. And that's exactly why I need to think of God as my Father.'

In both cases their understanding of God was framed by their experience of a father. For the one it forced her to reject the fatherhood of God, for the other, with the exact same experiences, it forced her to yearn for the fatherhood of God.

*Rev. Dr. David Johnson Rowe
Greenfield Hill Congregational Church, Fairfield, CT*

God the Father. Can I really love God the Father? If my own father was my abuser, can anyone including God expect that I could love Him with all my heart and soul? Is it possible to love someone, something, or some other if the image is a reminder of my own father? My God is the creator, sustainer, and redeemer of all life. Some say God is the Father. Others say God is Mother or Spirit. The important message is that God will speak to us in our own imagery.

*Louise Garrison
incest survivor (1984)*

God the Father is the image of a God who loves his children and will make the extra effort to provide for His children:

If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask?

Matthew 7:11

- If the image of God the Father is difficult for you, do any of the above quotes or Scriptures affect that image? If so, how?

God, the Husband

In the Old Testament we see God as the bridegroom.

For your Maker is your husband— the LORD Almighty is his name— (Isaiah 54:5a)

“In that day,” declares the Lord, “you will call me ‘my husband’; you will no longer call me ‘my master.’ I will betroth you to Me forever; I will betroth you in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion. I will betroth you in faithfulness, and you will acknowledge the Lord.

Hosea 2:16, 19-20

And throughout the New Testament the same imagery is used to describe Christ as the bridegroom and the church as the bride. The parable in Matthew 13:1-13, “The Parable of the Ten Virgins,” is one example.

God, the Bearded Man in the Sky... Not!

It is really not difficult to draw out the masculine descriptions of God found throughout Scripture and our theological traditions. God is often referred to as Lord or King, thought of as a mighty hunter or warrior, and even likened to a farmer. The masculine descriptions are many – but they have often either been depersonalized or vilified. It is easy to forget the personal, loving, masculine God.

We think of God as the angry, or at the very least strict and stern, old man in the sky. We don’t know much about him other than that he has a long beard, big stick, and he is very difficult to please. As much as we talked about embracing the Divine Goddess in our last session, we also need to strive to personalize the Masculine Deity.

- When you picture the masculine God how does that God look?
- How do male images in your life affect your perspective of the “He” part of God?
- Is it difficult for you to picture God as a male? Why or why not?

Wrapping it Up - Let God Define God

In Exodus 3:14 God, when speaking to Moses, said “I am who I am.” As we already discussed, God would not be limited by a name or a category – but would only be “limited” by God’s own character. Ultimately God is more than we can understand or even begin to comprehend.

It is encouraging to understand characteristics of God that make us who we are, being created in those images. But it is important to not let those images and descriptions limit who God is. Really now, we don't want God to be limited by the limits of our imagination, do we?! Or defined by the limits of our definitions? Or described by the limits of our descriptions? We want God to be more. We want God to be God. Let us try to be in the image of God without confining God to our image.

- Open discussion, if there is time.