

"The Motherhood of God"

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Trinitarian Congregational Church
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Deuteronomy 32: 4-7, 11-13, 18

(Please note the masculine and feminine images for God side by side.)

4The Rock, his work is perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God, without deceit, just and upright is he; 5yet his degenerate children have dealt falsely with him, a perverse and crooked generation. 6Do you thus repay the Lord, O foolish and senseless people? Is not he your father, who created you, who made you and established you?

7Remember the days of old, consider the years long past; ask your father, and he will inform you; your elders, and they will tell you. 11As an eagle stirs up its nest, and hovers over its young; as it spreads its wings, takes them up, and bears them aloft on its pinions, 12the Lord alone guided him; no foreign god was with him. 13He set him atop the heights of the land, and fed him with produce of the field; he nursed him with honey from the crags, with oil from flinty rock; 18You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you; you forgot the God who gave you birth.

Hosea 11:1-4

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols. Yet 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 led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them.

When I was in high school I started going to church for the first time in my life. My pastor used an illustration back then that I've never forgotten. I don't know if I've remembered it because he shared it a number of times, or just because it expresses an important spiritual truth. Or perhaps both. The illustration goes like this.

A woman was on a cruise ship traveling across the ocean. She knew it was a journey that would take several days, so she packed accordingly. She very carefully planned out her meals, packing a small cooler and food for each day. She only ate what she had rationed out to herself, so that she had enough food to eat. On the final day of the cruise she decided she hadn't seen enough of the ship, so she went exploring all the decks. Soon she came upon a huge dining room with the most glorious display of food she'd ever seen. She walked up to someone eating and said, "If you don't mind me asking, how much did you have to pay to enjoy all this food?" They looked at her rather strangely and said, "Nothing. It's all free. You paid for it with your ticket."

My pastor said that our relationship with our Creator is a lot like that - there's so much more spiritual food that is ours, if we only realized it. Jesus said that the one who comes unto him will never go away hungry or thirsty. Our God is a feast of spiritual food. And we will never comprehend, let alone finish the entire feast this side of heaven, prior to the heavenly banquet. There is always more for us to explore. I like the title of a book Catherine Marshall wrote years ago, *Something More*. There's always something more.

Well, today I want us to explore something more. It's a subject we don't talk a lot about, which is a bit surprising considering our modern sensibilities. But if we don't consider today's subject and its importance we're likely to go through the journeys of our lives missing out on some beautiful spiritual food, just like the traveler at sea who missed out on the feasts and lived on something much less than what was provided for her. What I want us to consider on this Mother's Day is the Motherhood of God.

Often with Confirmation Classes I've done an exercise with the kids called the "God Collage." We provide a table full of magazines, and each person in the class has to cut out pictures from the magazines that represent God, that present images of God.

- And so there are often oceans & mountains majesty, to express God the Creator - sometimes even stars to show us the vastness of a God who is greater than the cosmos.
- There are pictures of people smiling to represent the joy of God.
- Sometimes there are pictures of an elderly man with long white beard, looking like Gandalf.
- Sometimes the kids find pictures of Jesus who we believe presents us with the clearest picture of God the world has ever seen.
- Once in a while someone will put a picture of a mother and child, symbolizing a closeness with God.

At some point I'll usually ask the kids, do you think God is more male or female? Some times the answer is God is both, or God is neither. But it is surprising how many times we hear the answer, God's a man.

Now why would kids think that? Well, we sing, "Eternal Father, Strong to Save," not, "Eternal Mother, Strong to Save." We sing, "Dear Lord and Father of Mankind," not, "Dear Lord and Mother of Humankind." We sing, "This is My Father's World," and not, "This is my Mother's World." It's a lot easier picking hymns for Father's Day than Mother's Day!

Of course, Jesus did give us a prayer that began, "*Our Father who art in heaven.*" (I believe his point was more about parent/child intimacy than it was about gender) So it is understandable that our young people and even the rest of us not-so-young would think of God primarily in masculine terms and masculine images.

I attended another church on vacation once and the soloist got up to sing the great hymn, "He Leadeth Me." The first verse and the first time through the refrain she sang it straight from the hymnal.

*He leadeth me, O blessed thought, O words with heavenly comfort fraught,
What e'er I do, where e'er I be, still tis God's hand that leadeth me.
He leadeth me. He leadeth me. By his own hand, he leadeth me.
His faithful follower I would be for by his hand he leadeth me.*

The 2nd verse was pretty standard, too -

*Lord, I would clasp thy hand in mine, nor ever murmur nor repine;
Content what 'e're my lot may be, since 'tis my God who leadeth me.*

But then she sang,
*"She leadeth me. She leadeth me.
By her own hand she leadeth me.
Her faithful follower I would be.
For by her hand, she leadeth me.*

I wonder if you had the same reaction that I did? I said to myself, "I know that's theologically correct, but it just sounds weird." I'm not proud of that reaction. I only share it because it illustrates that sometimes our comfort level hasn't caught up with our theology.

Today I'd like to help our comfort levels catch up with our theology - because in over-emphasizing traditional masculine imagery of God, we may de-emphasize other aspects of God that are equally important and therefore miss out on a beautiful part of the feast of spirituality.

In St. Paul's Cathedral in London there's a plaque that shares a similar truth. The plaque says: *"This great cathedral was built to honor the majesty and glory of God. But as great as God's majesty is, greater still is God's mercy and love."* Our language for God, especially in our hymns, often expresses God's almightiness, God's omnipotence, God's majesty - but greater still is the tender mercy and love of God.

Let me give you one good, solid reason for considering the Motherhood of God - the Bible. (This isn't about Political Correctness. It's about Biblical Correctness!)

From the Book of Job: *God asks Job, From whose womb comes the ice? Who gives birth to the frost from the Heavens? (Job 38:29)*

From the Book of Genesis: *So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. (Gen. 1:27)*
Every time you look at a man you are seeing a reflection of our Creator.
And . . . every time you see a woman you are seeing a reflection of our Creator. Both are made in the image of God. And which group is a more clearer reflection!

From Paul's Letter to the Galatians: *In Christ's family there can be no divisions into Jew and non-Jew, slave and free, male and female. Among us you are all equal. (Gal. 3:28)*

The Words of Jesus: *Jerusalem, Jerusalem . . . how often have I desired to gather your children together as a mother hen gathers her brood under her wings. (Matt. 23:37)*

From the Book of Hosea: *God says, I will fall upon them like a mother bear robbed of her cubs. (Hosea 13:8)*

From the Book of Deuteronomy: *As a mother eagle stirs up her nest, fluttering over her young, and takes them and bears them on her wings, so the Lord led Israel. (Deut. 32:11)*

From the Book of Isaiah: *As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you. (Is. 66:13)* *Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you, says the Lord. (Is. 49:15)*

I could list even more. For instance, in **Luke 15** Jesus gives three images for God. The third one is the Forgiving Father in the Prodigal Son story. The first image is the Good Shepherd who leaves his flock and goes looking for the one lost sheep. But the second image for God that Jesus gives is that of a woman who loses a coin and then turns the house upsidedown looking for it until she finds it. The Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, the Lost Son.

God is like the Forgiving Father.

God is like the Good Shepherd.

God is like a woman.

Imagine how Jesus' listeners must have reacted when Jesus said, "God is like a woman." It must have challenged their comfort zones.

In **Luke 13** Jesus says, The Kingdom of God is like a woman who when she bakes uses just a little bit of yeast to effect a whole lot of flour. (Luke 13:20)
God is like a woman baking.

In **John 16** Jesus compared our struggles today to a woman in labor, who once the struggles are over experiences the fruit of her labor. Listen to how he says it: When a woman is in labor, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world. (John 16:21) Even though we don't believe Jesus was married, he still had a deep appreciation and understanding of motherhood. Think of his care for his own mother while he was on the cross - Looking at his mother and then to John, "Woman, behold your son." And then to John, "Behold your mother." And from that day on John looked after Mary and she looked after him.

Throughout Church History theologians have noted the feminine images for God in the scriptures and have highlighted their importance in our relationship with God. St. Anselm, St. Jerome, St. Augustine. Thomas Aquinas, and Count Zinzendorf, the founder of the Moravian Church - all lifted up the motherhood of God.

These images have a lot to say about the equality of woman and for women's roles in the church - which is a given for us, but think about the fact this morning that in over half of the churches in this country women are not allowed to be clergy. In many conservative Protestant churches, as well as, in Roman Catholic churches, women are not allowed to stand in a pulpit.

The female images for God are also helpful to those who had fathers who were distant or passive or abusive. Or for women who've had a traumatic

experience with a man. These images for God as a comforting mother, a nursing mother, a nurturing parent - are helpful in reminding us of the love God has for us and the intimacy God desires for us

So the next time you see a mother cradling her precious baby, remember that God loves you just like that.

Think about it.