

Father

One final time we turn to the Lectionary reading from July 28:

<p>LUKE 11:1-4 (NRSV) <i>He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples."</i>² <i>He said to them, "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name.</i></p>	<p><i>Your kingdom come.</i> ³ <i>Give us each day our daily bread.</i> ⁴ <i>And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.</i> <i>And do not bring us to the time of trial."</i></p>
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There is a movement, which I support, calling for inclusive language in the Judeo/Christian faith, including the use in Scripture of masculine names and pronouns when referring to God. Both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures use masculine pronouns and adjectives as primary references to God. We expect that, because the culture was patriarchal—male dominant; indeed, women largely were seen as property. But there always is resistance to tinkering with Scripture.

On the other hand, significant scriptural references to God are feminine. In the Genesis creation narratives, most English versions say "the Spirit of God moved over the face of the waters." The Hebrew verb, "moved", is feminine, and refers specifically to a brooding hen hovering over her newly-hatched chicks. Imagine: the divine power that created the universe imaged as a mother hen, hatching and hovering over her chicks—not exactly a "man of war."

In the books of Job, Ecclesiastes, Proverbs, and the Song of Solomon, the word, "Wisdom" is used in the same way John uses "Word"—"In the beginning was the Word"—in the prologue of his gospel. Both refer to the presence of God, and in the Hebrew text, the word is feminine.

There are other examples, but here's the thing: there are enough biblical references to understand that God transcends gender. We could say God is both masculine and feminine—or that God is neither—and around the turn of this century it became a major issue in some parts of the church. I am sympathetic to the concern, and try to avoid gender-specific references to God as a way of participating in the unconditional inclusiveness I find in the teachings of Jesus and in the early life of the church as described in the New Testament.

But that's now. When Jesus of Nazareth walked the earth it had not entered the consciousness of humanity that women were of value equally with men, even in the eyes of God. Jesus jumped into the middle of that patriarchal house of cards. He included women among his followers. No other Jewish prophet had ever done that. He intervened in the abuse of women—and of all those who were vulnerable to the male-dominated conquest culture of the day.

But, here he is, teaching his disciples to pray, "Father." It is absolutely essential that we put this in 1st century Jewish context.

Rabbis and Scribes had been divided about the nature of God since the first crude efforts were made to write down the testimony of God's people—the witness of their interaction with their God.

Some, in the most ancient of the writings, said God was jealous and territorial, brutally vengeful, judging and punishing harshly all who did not measure up to very rigid standards. And God was male. They portrayed God commanding his people to wipe out entire cities, killing men, women, children and livestock—because those people were pagan—and to “dash the heads of pagan babies on the rocks.”

Around 800 years before the birth of Jesus, a new breed of prophets appeared, and began to influence the rabbis and scribes. They depicted God as creator, sustainer and redeemer of all creation. Their image of God was nurturing and healing. This God did not punish. Pain and suffering did not come from God, but from Satan, and was the natural consequence of poor decisions. In this vision God called people to return to faithfulness in order to be blessed and to be a blessing. Still male, this God would not destroy those who were different but would work through his people to draw all peoples of the earth to his Holy Mountain.

The Hebrew Scriptures, in part, are an account—like the transcription of a courtroom proceeding—of centuries of the testimony and counter-testimony so typical of the rabbis. They were not afraid of contradictions; indeed, they welcomed them as opportunities to increase their learning through the dialogue between the opposing views. [What a concept!]

I have many friends and relatives whose view of Scripture doesn't allow contradictions. God dictated every word of Scripture verbatim, and God would not contradict himself. So, God is both loving Father and punishing judge. God says “Thou shalt not kill,” and then orders his people to “kill every living thing and dash their babies against a rock.” Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, played by Jack Nicholson.

The faith of Israel grew and flourished in the exchange between opposing views; so those views were included intentionally into the Holy Writings of the Hebrew people. The debate continued, intentionally unresolved, into the time of Jesus, and Jesus participated in the debate. In his wilderness temptation, the devil said, “The Bible says this...” and Jesus responded, “The Bible also says...” and the debate went on: testimony and counter-testimony.

Jesus took sides. Jesus imaged God, not as vengeful, conquering warrior or punishing judge, but as “Father.”

Last year at Easter I told you a story about when I was sixteen, just learning to drive. My family was returning from vacation and I was driving. My grandmother had gone with us, and we stopped by her house to drop her off. As I turned into the driveway I misjudged and hit a post at the entrance. The left headlight

was broken, and the fender was dented. My dad made some predictable response, and when we got out of the car, he went immediately to the front of the car to survey the damage.

I moved to the trunk—which was in the rear of the car—and very magnanimously began to unload Grandmother's suitcase and carry it inside.

It was the first new car my mom and dad had ever owned—a 1957 Plymouth (You know—rocket fins on the rear fenders.)

The vacation was over, and I assumed my driving career would be suspended. My wings would be clipped. Grounded. Busted to a desk job! But as we walked back to the car, Dad tossed me the keys and walked around to the passenger door.

There was no need for punishment. I already had done enough of that to myself. What was needed was a restoration of self-worth. What was needed was the gift of trust that restores the confidence needed to continue the process of learning and maturing.

That's the image portrayed when Jesus teaches us to pray, "Father..."

As for the masculinity of the word, fast forward to the 21st century. Not because we are smarter or more spiritual, but because we stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us—we have the advantage of the accumulation of their knowledge and wisdom, and on that basis we can trace the trajectory of the biblical Word that leads to Jesus, the "Word-become-flesh". As Jesus used the word, the qualities inherent in the word, "Father," apply equally to the word, "Mother." There is no biblical necessity for taking Jesus' addressing God as "Father," and extrapolating from that that God is male.

What difference does that make? Ask any woman.