



LOOKING AT GOD FROM THE FEMININE PERSPECTIVE



Rev. Peggy Casteel-Huston
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Sixth Sunday after Easter
Mother's Day

Proverbs 8:22-36

Wisdom's Part in Creation

- ²² The LORD created me at the beginning of his work,
the first of his acts of long ago.
- ²³ Ages ago I was set up,
at the first, before the beginning of the earth.
- ²⁴ When there were no depths I was brought forth,
when there were no springs abounding with water.
- ²⁵ Before the mountains had been shaped,
before the hills, I was brought forth—
- ²⁶ when he had not yet made earth and fields,
or the world's first bits of soil.
- ²⁷ When he established the heavens, I was there,
when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,
- ²⁸ when he made firm the skies above,
when he established the fountains of the deep,
- ²⁹ when he assigned to the sea its limit,
so that the waters might not transgress his command,
when he marked out the foundations of the earth,
- ³⁰ then I was beside him, like a master worker;
and I was daily his delight,
rejoicing before him always,
- ³¹ rejoicing in his inhabited world
and delighting in the human race.
- ³² "And now, my children, listen to me:
happy are those who keep my ways.
- ³³ Hear instruction and be wise,
and do not neglect it.

³⁴ Happy is the one who listens to me,
watching daily at my gates,
waiting beside my doors.
³⁵ For whoever finds me finds life
and obtains favor from the LORD;
³⁶ but those who miss me injure themselves;
all who hate me love death."

This is the word of God, let our thanks be to God.

Today is Mother's Day and while Mother's Day is not a liturgical day such as Easter, Pentecost, Advent or Lent it is a day when we think about the women in our lives who mean so much to us. Hopefully, for all of us, we hold good memories of our mothers and if not then memories of women who had a positive impact on our lives.

I was lucky enough to be one of those persons who can say that I had a great mom, but I can also name women who had a positive impact on my life, and I hope you can as well, taking the time to give God thanks for them. For me, the women I can name were women of courage and strength. Women who inspired me. It was from women (mostly) where I felt the support and encouragement to become a pastor for which I will always be grateful.

Since it is Mother's Day and we are thinking about women who influenced us, I thought I could take this opportunity to share with you the voices of women whose theological insights continue to challenge and inspire me..

As a pastor, it has always been important to me to read the great theologians of our Reformed faith (John Calvin, Augustine, Heinrich Bullinger, Ulrich Zwingli, Karl Barth) but it has also been important to me to find and read women who were and are influencers in doctrine and theology as well. Fact - women see things differently than men. The earliest women's voices were those who lived within the monastic system.

In her book, "To Pray and To Love". Roberta Bondi, retired professor of church history from Emory University, wrote this book on prayer based on what her readings revealed to her from the Desert Fathers, known as Abbots AND from the Desert Mothers, known as Ammas. Yes, you heard me correctly. There were Desert Mothers, women who left their lives in order to pray and to love as God loves. Bondi writes that "*the starting and ending point of her book is the early monastic conviction that love of God and of neighbor is the goal of the Christian life and only a person who loves is a fully functioning human being.*"

Bondi tells the story of Dessert Mothers who, in their personal lives, did not have much control always being at the disposal of husbands, fathers, or brothers. What Roberta Bondi learned is that the monastic life meant freedom for women from the control of male relatives. Within monastic communities' women were asked to put off "feminine weakness" (I would love to know what that meant) in order to be taken seriously by their male colleagues and to travel freely. Bondi reports that a small amount of literature by monastic women exists because it was not considered 'worthy' of being preserved. However, some of their writings were preserved, and Dr. Bondi discovered and published some in her book.

One Dessert Mother by the name of Amma Syncletica wrote about how it is hard work to learn to love yourself and to love our neighbor. She wrote, *"In the beginning there are a great many battles and a good deal of suffering for those who are advancing towards God and afterwards, ineffable joy. It is like those who wish to light a fire; at first they are choked by the smoke and cry, and by this means obtain what they seek, so we must kindle the divine fire in ourselves through tears and hard work."*

I learned that the Dessert Fathers and the Dessert Mothers had much to teach us about God.

In my seminary training, study of the language was not optional. Everyone took Hebrew and Greek and the exegetical classes that followed. The seminary wanted to equip pastors with some skills to be able to look at the word of God in the original language, and to be introduced to theologians and scholars who do in-depth work in the languages so that we could mine deeply into God's word.

This is where I began to understand the importance and value of how we name God. At seminary, I learned that while there are male names and images of God, the prominent Hebrew names for God are verbs or non-gendered names such as YHWH, which is translated, "I Am who I am" or "I Am who I shall be".

YHWH is a verb which means 'to exist', 'to be', or 'to breathe'. Writers added the pronoun as we cannot speak of a person using a verb. When God is represented as speaking, they give it the pronoun "I" or "He".

I learned that scriptural references to God fall into 4 types: literal designations, names for God, personifications, and metaphors. The prophets and writers of the Old Testament used each type to try to help people understand this One who is our breath.

One of the personifications for God is Wisdom which we heard in our scripture reading this morning. Sophia is the Greek for wisdom that was present at creation. Wisdom is a noun engendered as female.

The Jewish people knew that this was a feminine expression of God, however, it was severely repressed in the Jewish culture in the interest of safe-guarding the oneness and transcendence of God. Israel was careful in their time not to personify God as having a divine consort which was taught in the gods of the Greeks. God was one God and not a family of gods.

There is one more feminine personification of God – Shekinah – to dwell. Shekinah, in the ancient Jewish tradition, was the divine feminine aspect of God. It refers to the mysterious ways that the Divine presence was recognized by the Israelites such as the cloud that covered the mountain when Moses spoke to God, or the cloud by day and the fire by night that led them through the wilderness.

Both of these terms are ways that even today represents our awareness of the presence of God in our lives. We look for the wisdom of God to speak and to lead us and the indwelling of God – which is very much the Holy Spirit of God who is always with us.

So to give you a taste of female theologians, I want you to hear from Feminist Theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether, Womanist Theologian Rev. Dr. Patricia Hunter and a Mujerista Theologian Ada Maria (I-zas-e)Isasi-Diaz. Each one has important ways to think of God from the white female perspective, from the African American women's perspective and from the Hispanic women's perspective but all will share the concern that we can make God too small.

Rosemary Radford Ruether writes that we are to be open to discovering the Divine in unexplored places – such as in a women's experience, in other cultures and even non-Christian religious traditions. She would remind us that 'openness' does not demand 'agreement with' but it does require one to have the capacity to listen deeply. She writes that there is a reliance upon parental imagery for God and while she would agree this works on many levels the problem is that it can create too much of a childlike dependency which cuts off moral maturity and responsibility making us dependent children instead of allowing us to grow up.

Ruether calls herself an agnostic (meaning uncertain and/or unknowable) when it comes to the topics of salvation and eternal life. But reading carefully, listening carefully, what Ruether wants to convey is that we never as humans should say "well that situation can't be fixed until Jesus comes

again” – but rather that we remain a bit agnostic in our thinking so that, to quote her, “our responsibility is to use our temporal life span to create a just and good community for our generation and for our children being fully present in this time.”

For Ruether, making God too small would be to say that there are some ways we can't use our creativity, our aptitudes and abilities to help work towards a more just world.

Rev. Dr. Patricia Hunter, with the Seattle First Baptist Church, is an African American Womanist theologian who says that God no longer is created in the image of the dominate culture – meaning white males. Womanist theologians give God permission to be God all by God's self. Dr. Hunter says that we must start from a new premise that God is no longer male and that God is not made in the image of the dominate culture – again white male. As we begin to do this then women, especially women of color can begin to reimage themselves believing that they too were also created in the image of God. One of her concerns when we image God as male only is that some will not feel that women are good enough to have all the gifts God has given to humanity – perhaps not as smart, not as theologically sound, and with less ability to preach the word. She wonders how different our lives would be had we been told as little girls that it is truly a gift of God's grace to be born female.

Latin Theologian Ada Maria (I-zas-e)Isasi-Diaz writes a theology based on the reality of Hispanic women that entails a liberating practice she will call Mujerista theology. Mujerista theology is about maintaining the meaning of faith and personal identity in the midst of physical survival. Hispanic women are so preoccupied with their own physical survival and the survival of their culture that their experience of God would be very different even from that of women who are feminists in the Anglo culture. In the Latino community the preservation of the family is the role of the woman. This would be a very different context in which to understand God than in a culture where women are not as focused on physical or cultural survival. For Isasi-Diaz, making God too small would be to relegate God to specific cultures, social classes or people groups.

One way that helps me in my quest to keep from making God too small is that I enjoy reading theologians from different cultural contexts and certainly who write in ways that challenge my own personal belief system.

Feminist theology, Womanist theology, Latin American theology – all read with some similarities and with some challenges is like seeing the difference in our New Testament stories but always remembering to read scripture with

an understanding that there is wideness to God's mercy that begins with Creation, continues with our Easter story and results in the power of God's Spirit everywhere today.

I will close with the words of a hymn written by the author as the original words to the hymn, "There's A Wideness In God's Mercy". It was interesting to me to learn that this whole idea that we can make God too small was even a concern for the author Frederick Faber in 1854. In the original version it wasn't called "There's a Wideness in God's Mercy", it was called "Souls of Men, Why Will Ye Scatter" – and I want you to hear the additional words to the original hymn as understood even then:

Souls of men! Why will ye scatter
Like a crowd of frightened sheep?
Foolish hearts! Why will ye wander
From a love so true and deep?
It is God: His love looks mighty,
But is mightier than it seems;
For our Father: and His fondness
Goes far out beyond our dreams.
But we make His love too narrow
By false limits of our own;
And we magnify His strictness
With a zeal He will not own..
Was there ever kinder shepherd
Half so gentle, half so sweet,
As the Savior who would have us
Simply gather at His feet?

Let us pray: Holy One, God of mystery being One who is unfathomable and yet willing to be known all at the same time, help us try to not determine limits on the ways we seek to understand you. Help us to feel Your love, Your presence and empowered by Your Spirit to follow Your Wisdom in every choice we make. In Jesus' name, Amen.