

God, our Divine Parent
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NPMC – May 14, 2023 (Mother’s Day)

Scripture: Acts 17:22-31 (God in whom we live, move, and have our being), and John 14:15-21 (God as Father and (Feminine) Spirit/Comforter)

Hymns: VT 517 - Children of the Heavenly Father; VT 518 - Like a Mother Who Has Borne Us

Acts 17:22-31

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see how extremely spiritual you are in every way. ²³ For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴ The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, ²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. ²⁶ From one ancestor^[e] he made all peoples to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, ²⁷ so that they would search for God^[f] and perhaps fumble about for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. ²⁸ For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said,

‘For we, too, are his offspring.’

²⁹ “Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. ³⁰ While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹ because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

John 14:15-21

¹⁵ “If you love me, you will keep^[g] my commandments. ¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate,^[h] to be with you forever. ¹⁷ This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him because he abides with you, and he will be^[i] in^[j] you.

¹⁸ “I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. ¹⁹ In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. ²⁰ On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. ²¹ They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me, and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.”

Earlier this year, a friend of mine had her first baby. As someone who is a critical thinker, she set about deconstructing some of the assumptions about motherhood right away. About a week after her child was born, she posted something on social media about how parent-child love isn’t the be all and end all of love; that people who don’t

have children are not less capable of love than those who do; that this is not a more profound type of love than any other. Part of me really gets this. There is a persistent cultural notion that women, in particular, must all want to become mothers, which simply isn't the case. But I had to smile a bit at someone making a big pronouncement about parenting only one week into the experience! At that stage, your baby can't even focus their eyes on you yet, never mind smile or talk. That relationship, like any other, will deepen and grow over time. I've been a parent for a decade, and still feel like I'm learning so much with the different stages of my children's lives!

But while I agreed with my friend's sentiment, I also found myself a bit, well, uncomfortable with it. You see, our society tends to both idealize motherhood (which she took issue with) but also take it for granted. The pandemic really highlighted this gap in our society as daycares and schools were shut down, and mostly mothers shouldered the responsibilities of somehow working from home while homeschooling/parenting around the clock. It was a recipe for disaster for mothers' mental health. We can see this in general attitudes toward caregiving as well. In our family, my spouse has chosen to be a stay-at-home parent while our kids are young. There have been so many times when he's been asked when he's going to be working, as if what he does for our family isn't work! Many caregiving roles in our society – parenting, caring for aging parents, caring for loved ones with disabilities, even cleaning, nursing, and teaching jobs – are too often undervalued and taken for granted. To say that parent-child relationships are no big deal risks confirming this idea that the work of parenting, mothering, or caregiving is likewise “no big deal.” But it's absolutely crucial!

So while this relationship between parents and children isn't any better than others, it is for many a profound and unique relationship of love. That's why it's been used over the millennia as a central image for God in the Bible and theology. We are maybe more familiar with the Bible's use of "Father" as a name for God, but God is named as Mother in multiple passages, from the prophets Isaiah and Hosea (where God is a Mother in Labour (Isaiah 42:14), a Comforting Mother (Isaiah 66:13), and a Fierce Mother Bear (Hosea 13:8)) to Jesus calling himself a comforting Mother Hen (Matthew 23:37 and Luke 13:34). Interestingly, mothering AND fathering images also make their way into our passages for today. And sometimes they are even mixed! So let's dig in.

Acts 17 provides us with a bit of a strange story about Paul making cross-cultural connections in the city of Athens. Now Athens was known in that time for being an intellectual centre of the Roman Empire. This is where the wise scholars and philosophers were. So Paul, seemingly not intimidated in the least, sets out to preach the Good News to this group of wise people, presumably to enlighten them – a fairly bold move! He focuses on a certain altar that is dedicated to "the Unknown God" (Greek: *Agnosto Theo*), and proceeds to tell the people that he knows this God, that it is God the Creator of the world, God who gives "life and breath and all things," and whose "offspring" we all are. Though Paul mentions a couple of names for God here, I find it remarkable that he emphasizes the name of Divine Parent in particular: this is the God who is our life-giver, the God who gave us breath, the God "in whom we live and move and have our being." This last image therefore takes things a step further. It speaks not only of God as external Creator, but as the very context in which we live. To me, it holds

imagery of God as a Womb, who enfolds us and surrounds us in mothering love, meeting all our needs. God as Mothering Womb therefore brings a whole new meaning to the Psalmist's idea that there is nowhere we can go where God is not (Psalm 139). It reminded me of a hymn. Voices Together 176 (HWB 155) by Harris J. Loewen, picks up this imagery in a beautiful way, stating, "O God, great womb of wondrous love, your Spirit moving on the deep / did wake a world within yourself, a pulsing, lighted world, from sleep." This is God, the Great Womb in whom we live, and move, and have our being.

Talk about a major shift here! Paul is leading the Athenians from ideas of capricious gods as idols demanding unquestioning obedience, to God who is the loving Parent who surrounds all of us in life-giving relationship, and connects us with all of humanity as our siblings.¹ For Paul's Greek audience, that was a new theology, previously unknown. Perhaps a message for our day is to familiarize ourselves with God our Mother, who has become an "unknown God" to many of us, buried under a preference for male imagery only over the course of our tradition.

Our passage from John 14 gives us even more to think about as God is depicted with even more of a fluid gender identity. In this short passage, God is identified both as Father and Comforting Spirit. Though it gets lost in our English Bible translations, this Spirit can actually be referred to as "she" in the text, as commentator Angela Parker reminds us; we need not read it with "the rule of masculinity" for the Divine. So this passage reads: "If you love me, you will ['hold fast (or keep)'] my commandments. And I

¹ This goes against some of the dangers of Christian triumphalism or sense of superiority which this text can lead to. See Jeremy L. Williams, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/sixth-sunday-of-easter/commentary-on-acts-1722-31-6>

will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper [or Comforter], to be with you forever. She is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because the world neither sees her nor knows her. You know her, because she abides with you and she will be in you.”² Isn't that a wonderful shift, to naming God as both Father and Comforting Mother-Spirit here?

Another connection to divine femininity is that the opening of this passage, “if you love me, you will keep my commandments,” recalls the words of Divine Woman Wisdom in the apocryphal book *Wisdom of Solomon* 6:18 – so Jesus is here speaking as Wisdom herself. This means that Jesus is both Wisdom of God and Word of God in the Gospel of John – and therefore imaged as both female and male. Taken together “these echoes act as markers of binary crossings,” says Parker, and can be read as an “invitation to ‘queer’ our standard interpretations of John’s Gospel” – that is, to read this passage with eyes to see God as male, female, and non-binary in gender. So God is our Mother, our Father, our Parent.

But hang on here. You might be wondering whether this is taking things too far. Is this not reading contemporary notions of gender back into the biblical texts? Interestingly, while they may not share the exact terminology that we would use today (which our “Welcoming Conversations” have been focusing on for the past few Sundays), these notions of gender are already there in these ancient texts! We have just underemphasized them or interpreted them away according to our own cultural assumptions and biases. As Rabbi Mark Sameth reminds us, this notion of God as

² Angela N. Parker, “Commentary on John 14:15-21,” *Working Preacher*, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/sixth-sunday-of-easter/commentary-on-john-1415-21-6>

“dual-gendered” is not a new idea – nor is it limited to the New Testament! He traces these kinds of mixtures of gendered terms in much of the Hebrew Bible as well. Though we assume God as Father is the default, the divine names of God as Father and Mother are often mixed or used interchangeably within the same passage. For example, “In Deuteronomy 32:6 Moses explicitly refers to God as “your father” (*avicha*). ...And yet the Hebrew Bible tells us this same God “convulsed in labor for you,” “gave birth to you,” and “suckled [or nursed] you” (Deuteronomy 32:13 and 18). Such contrasting images—of Divine Father and Divine Mother, just a few lines apart—suggest a dual-gendered deity.”³ He makes the case also that “YHWH—the so-called ineffable name of God, which some have guessed was pronounced Yahweh or Jehovah—is a cryptogram composed of the Hebrew pronouns ‘he’ and ‘she.’”⁴ In this way, God’s dual-genderedness, God as non-binary, actually appears throughout our Scriptures, despite our assumptions (and those of biblical translators) that only maleness is the default. Sameth calls it an “open secret,” and one that “we may welcome [as] a way of speaking about God which affirms people who identify as non-binary, gender-fluid, transgender, or otherwise genderqueer.”⁵ Is this – God as our genderqueer Parent – another “unknown” name for God which we are in need of recovering for the sake of love?

So what does this mean for us on this Mother’s Day? Can we widen our circle of those who have mothered us and are mothering others, doing the profound and demanding work of caregiving in the image of God our (Multi-Gendered) Caregiver? I think we have to remember that this day brings many diverse experiences of grief and

³ Mark Sameth, “Our Father, Who Art Our Mother: The (Open) Secret – Queer History of God,” Aug. 13, 2020, <https://religiondispatches.org/our-father-who-art-our-mother-the-open-secret-queer-history-of-god/>

⁴ Sameth.

⁵ Sameth.

loss, gratitude, comfort, wisdom, conflict, longing and joy. I find this graphic helpful to hold some of these experiences before us on Mother's Day in particular:

THINKING OF YOU



MOTHERS WHO
HAVE LOST
CHILDREN



THOSE WHO HAVE
LOST MOTHERS



THOSE WITH
STRAINED MOTHER
RELATIONSHIPS



MOTHERS WITH
STRAINED CHILD
RELATIONSHIPS



THOSE WHO HAVE
CHOSEN NOT TO BE
MOTHERS



THOSE YEARNING
TO BE MOTHERS

What makes these
biblical images of our

Mother-Father God so helpful is also that they transcend the brokenness that we might face in our parental relationships. Theologian Dorothee Soelle argues for this “comforting” way to understand the image of God as Father: “The father in heaven, father of all orphans, father of all those whose empirical fathers have long since taken off, is an image of longing to find justice and a home.”⁶ So, in this way, may we be continue to be grateful for our Mother-Father God in whom we live, and move, and have our being, in whom we always have a home. And may our caring for one another and especially the little ones among us be an embodiment of Rabbi Sameth’s take on Jesus’ prayer: “Our Father, who art our Mother, hallowed be your name.” AMEN

⁶ Dorothee Soelle, *Theology for Skeptics: Reflections on God*, trans. Joyce L. Irwin (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 19.