

The Mother-Like Love of God

Deuteronomy 32:9-12 and Matthew 23:37

Mother's Day and Father's Day are wonderful times to honor our parents, celebrating their love and care for us. It's a great day to worship together as a family within our extended church family. And usually the Sunday sermon has something to do with the characteristics of what a godly Christian mother or father should be. On Father's Day it's often popular for the sermon to be about the 'father-like' attributes of God since God is a gracious and loving heavenly Father.

Mother's Day actually provides a good opportunity to talk about some of the 'mother-like' attributes of God. In doing so I'd like to start off by affirming the fact that God is neither a male nor female being. Just as Jesus told the Samaritan woman at the well, "God is Spirit, and those who worship God must worship in spirit and in truth."

I think that's very important because the way people tend to view God has been kind of like a pendulum. On the one side of that pendulum, some Christians have tended to emphasize the so called masculine characteristics of God, as a mighty warrior, or the image of God as an old man with a long white flowing beard. And there definitely are male images of God in the Bible. But in the last 30 years or so, for some Christians the pendulum has swung all the way over to the other side; instead of strictly male images, they're depicting female images, like a female "Christa" on the cross instead of a male Christ. And some even worship God with the name "Sophia", which is the Greek name for wisdom.

For some people, a masculine image of God just doesn't work, and they refer to God as a goddess. I've actually known some United Methodists who choose to refer to God as she. Sometimes women who have experienced a family trauma or perhaps were abandoned by their father may find it too difficult for her to refer to God in masculine terms. Or perhaps they never had a positive father figure in their life. Therefore they may choose to think of God in more feminine terms.

Is it right for some to do so? Is it wrong? If giving God feminine names like Sophia or Christa is wrong, then what is it about orthodox Christianity that is leading people to go to such an extreme side of the pendulum? I think it is because they have never been presented with a balanced view of God in the Bible. Perhaps the churches or denominations that these goddess worshippers are coming out of have done a poor job in presenting a full and complete picture of God. These may be churches where a hierarchical view of male as being more authoritative than female is taught and propagated. So some women are feeling frustrated and inhibited with the idea of God as a male father figure.

It's important to remember that God isn't some kind of male being, nor is God some kind of female being. God actually contains both maleness and femaleness, and at the same time is actually neither.

The reason I say this is because of that we read in Genesis chapter 1, "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." Man here is referring to mankind, both male and female, so this is suggesting that the image of God contains both maleness and femaleness. Yet at the same time, God is not a sexual being. And that's very important to understand because one very prominent sect does perceive God as being a sexual male being. But the Biblical God is not a sexual being, He doesn't have to be, because he's God.

I once heard a theology professor say that the reason the Old Testament God was presented to Israel in more masculine terms was because all the other surrounding pagan nations worshipped feminine images of God. And these goddesses were directly connected to nature and fertility. So all the pagan rituals were trying to manipulate nature and insure fertility. The Israelite God, however, was not connected to nature. He was presented as being the creator God who could not be manipulated, or appeased. He was to be followed and obeyed. And there were a lot of terms for God like El Shaddai, meaning God Almighty, and Adonai, meaning Lord, which tend to feel and sound more masculine. And we need these strong images of God's might and sovereignty.

But, at the same time, I think we also need the images of God that sound more feminine, which we also find in the Bible. In the Passage we read this morning from Deuteronomy 32 a metaphor for God is used, comparing God to a mother eagle who stirs up her nest and hovers over her young. This describes the tenderness of God's love for Israel. And, as this mother eagle teaches her young to fly, protects them and encourages them to imitate her own movements, God's calling, training and protection of Israel are all depicted in this image. Also, at the end of this passage, the people are reprimanded for their disobedience to God with these words: "You were unmindful of the rock that bore you; you forgot the God who gave you birth." Certainly these ideas of bearing and giving birth are feminine ideas, describing God as Israel's mother.

Among the other verses that represent God in a feminine way is Isaiah 66:13 which is our key verse today in your bulletin. God is saying to the people of Israel, "As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you." Nurturing and comforting are often described as being feminine characteristics. Looking back on the many times you have gone through heartache and trials, aren't you glad that God's mother-like spirit was there to comfort you and see you through?

A loving mother would only want the best for her children. She would yearn for them, and patiently hope for them to make the best decisions and to be successful in life. Of course men also can have those kind of nurturing feelings.

And it was with this kind of nurturing, caring motherly love that Jesus had when he looked out upon the city of Jerusalem and said, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing.”

Some people have said that Jesus was such a whole and self-actualized person, that he wasn't afraid to get in touch with his feminine side. He was certainly able to show compassion and tenderness to all who needed it. And Jesus understood the feelings that a mother had for her children. Think about the times that Jesus interacted with mothers during his ministry here on earth. He seemed to always have a great deal of compassion for the way these mothers felt about their sick children. He commended the Syrophenician woman for her faith and healed her daughter. He was moved by the widow of Nain's grief over her dead son, and, as they were carrying him out to bury him, Jesus raised him from the dead and gave him back to his mother. And even when he was dying on the cross, Jesus cared about the feelings and future of his dear mother Mary as he commended her care to his disciple John.

Jesus knew and understood the feelings of mothers and he himself shared their nurturing and loving character, reflecting the maternal character of our Creator God. And reflecting on the ultimate act of care shown by Jesus reminds me of a story I heard about a particular mother in Japan. In Hokkaido, the northernmost island of Japan, it snows quite heavily. And on one particular farmhouse the build-up of snow on the roof was extremely thick. And somehow as the young mother who lived in that farmhouse was leaving the house with her young daughter, all the snow fell off the roof of her house all at once and landed on top of the mother and daughter like an avalanche. When the husband came back to the farmhouse much later and discovered his wife and daughter gone, he and others began searching for them. I don't remember how long they had searched before they found them buried under the snow. His wife's body was enveloping the little girl's body to protect her and keep her warm. The little daughter was found safe and alive, but the mother had died trying to save her.

This beautiful act of maternal sacrifice reminds me of the sacrifice that Christ made on our behalf. Out of the depths of his great love and care for us, Jesus endured all the suffering and agonizing death of crucifixion so that our sins could be atoned for. He gave his life, so that we could be safe. That's how great his love was and is today.

I think the message from all this for us on this Mother's Day is that God's love for us is not only like a loving heavenly father, but it's also like a nurturing, protective, caring and self-sacrificing mother who wants the best for her children, who wants to gather them together as a mother hen gathers her chicks under her wings to keep them safe. That's the kind of God you have. That's how much God loves you.

And, if you are a mother, God knows how you feel. God knows what you are going through, how much you yearn for your children, how much you try to protect them, and care for them, how much you have sacrificed for them. And it's a beautiful thing. The idea of motherhood was created by God, the God who created us in His image, male and female. Motherhood should never be seen as some kind of secondary, inconsequential activity or occupation. Motherhood springs from the very heart and being of God, and a woman who celebrates and delights in her role as a mother grasps a very essential part of the character of God.

Those of you who aren't mothers (you men or women who aren't yet mothers or who used to be mothers), you need to live in appreciation and awe of our earthly mothers and other female nurturers who have loved us so much and done so much for us. And all of us can be thankful that our loving Lord God in heaven knows how to shower all of us with maternal love everyday of our lives.

In closing, I'd like to say that many of the hymns that were chosen for our worship service this morning are hymns that give us images of God's mother-like love for us. And I'd like to refer to the hymn we are about to sing, "Praise to the Lord, the Almighty" number 139. This hymn gives us many masculine images of God. For example verse 1 says, "Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of Creation." But it also gives us some beautiful feminine images of God's love, such as verse 2 "Praise to the Lord, who o'er all things so wondrously reigning, bears thee on eagle's wings, e'er in his keeping maintaining. God's care enfolds, all whose true good he upholds. Hast thou not known his sustaining?" And also verse 4 says, "Praise to the Lord, who doth nourish thy life and restore thee, fitting thee well for the tasks that are ever before thee. Then to thy need God as a mother doth speed, spreading the wings of grace o'er thee."

Today, as we thank God for the love of our dear human mothers, let us also delight in God's wonderful mother-like love and care for each one of us and be thankful.