

Lost in Translation
Hosea 11: 1-4, 8
Saugatuck Congregational Church

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Mothers Day
May 14, 2006

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. How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender.

Hosea 11: 1-4, 8

This is a sermon about God as Mother— I figured you'd give me a lot of latitude for this on Mother's Day. It grows out of the Women's retreat a year ago: The Feminine Face of God: Growing into Wholeness. But I thought if I used that title, many of you would just tune out from the start, having the same resistance I had to the whole theme. Lindsey will tell you I had to be persuaded into this retreat topic.

My early exposure to feminist theology and inclusive language was not positive. I started seminary in 1977. There was a lot of anger in the air. It was a polarized time. There was a lot of dubious scholarship and wishful thinking. People arguing for inclusive language asserted that the Patriarchs and prophets being men, used masculine imagery for God and we, being liberated should just change the language to be inclusive.

But if you think, as I do, that scripture is revealed, and not invented; received (admittedly imperfectly), but not created: just changing it is a tricky proposition: where do you stop?

In my experience, the people who found this easy to do, didn't love scripture, and they didn't know it: there was very little they knew by heart. So just changing it to fit their theology and sociology wasn't the same thing for them as it was for me; for whom the words of the Word were sacred, and known, and loved all my life. I didn't find them to be exclusive, I found my self in them.

So on one side of this polarized debate were those who felt we should just supply the feminine imagery and language Biblical authors had omitted. At the other pole were those who accepted the premise that feminine imagery and language were unrepresented, but felt this was as God willed and intended. I remember reading an essay when I was a new minister, in 1982, 1983? (I remember it imperfectly, but I remember the punch line clearly.) A woman, I think a Baptist, wrote, We don't know the mystery of God, and we don't know the fulness of God, but whatever God is in Godself, to us God has revealed Himself as Father!_Well, that's true--- but not complete.

Neither extreme in the discussion seemed to have done a close reading of scripture which uses both masculine and feminine imagery for God. We know this. We see it in our call to worship:

As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you.

We see it in today's text

I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks.

I bent down to them and fed them.

We see it in the parables of Jesus. Right after the Parable of the Ninety and Nine, that image we know so well of the shepherd carrying home the lost lamb; Jesus tells another parable, that we don't carry in our heads, the parallel parable of the woman seeking her lost coin, and calling together her friends and neighbors to rejoice with her when she has found the coin that was lost.

But here's part of the problem: that image is there in scripture, it's there in the words of Jesus; but it's not in our heads and hearts. How many of us ever saw a picture of God as a woman dancing at a party with coins in her hands? I never did. It's not in my memory bank; it's not in my heart. And yet all of us have clear images of Jesus or God carrying the lamb on his shoulders. We've seen picture after picture; it's in hymn after hymn.

The emphasis on one and omission of the other is not the fault of scripture. It's the fault of the interpreters of our age, and it is right to call us to account so that we pay attention. That's not a feminist task, that's the task of anyone who loves the Word. Jesus gave us this story of the woman seeking and finding the lost coin for a reason. Why is it that we have paid so little attention? Sometimes, it's not that the feminine imagery isn't there; it's that we overlook it.

Listen to Moses in his last sermon to the Hebrews

You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you;

you forgot the God who gave you birth. New Revised Standard Version

This is obviously a maternal image, although, like many, it can be lost in translation. The Jerusalem Bible says

You forget the Rock who begot you,

unmindful now of the God who fathered you.

In the first part of the verse, the verb can be either masculine or feminine, but in the second part, there is no ambiguity in the Hebrew; it is clearly giving birth as a mother. It's not the text, but the translation that is masculine only.

But the issue of translation goes much deeper than translators choosing masculine imagery for God when it's not in the text. The issue of translation goes to the Hebrew words and roots of words used all through scripture. And this is what fascinated me about the issue of inclusive language, and the feminine face of God. What I discovered as I looked at the Hebrew was how deeply feminine aspects of God are woven into the Biblical text, and those first hearers and scribes knew it: they spoke Hebrew! It was obvious to them, but we don't see it in the English translation at all.

Here's the one that struck me first. All through scripture, we have the name *God Almighty*, and it's in our prayer life and liturgy and hymnody. In Genesis we read:

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him, "I am El Shaddai God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless." Gen 17:1-2

El Shaddai occurs all through the Hebrew Scriptures, and it's almost always translated "God Almighty." Hebrew words are all formed on a consonant base of 2 or 3 letters and the words formed by that consonant base are a family of connected meanings.

El is God

On the cross Jesus cries out, *Eli, Eli, Lema Sabachtani?*

Eli- adding a personal pronoun: "My God, my God"

Names are often formed of these root consonants in combination.

Eli-jah is "Jehovah is God" Or My God is Jehovah." You can't tell which

from Hebrew. Eli-sha (shuah) = "God is salvation" or My God saves

Add *El* and Schema—Hear, "*Schema* O Israel" and you get Ishmael-- God

Hears, a meaning integral to the story of Ishmael

So, *El Shaddai*: God Almighty. Now, this is good. This is delightful. This is great for Mother's Day. The root of *Shaddai*—Almighty, is *Shad* which is the word for breast! The original readers of Scriptures knew this, it wasn't lost on them! It wasn't exactly lost on the translators either, because some of them translated *El Shaddai* as "God of the Mountains"- which is pretty funny.

Shaddai in Hebrew connotes all nourishing, all sufficient, in the way that breast milk is all sufficient for a nursing infant. It is a feminine aspect of God. And this is not peripheral. This is not a simile: "As an eagle tends her young;" This is how God revealed Godself to Abraham: I am *El Shaddai*.

Shaddai is not the only word translated by the English "Almighty" but it often is, so maybe one of the translations we should make in our heads, and in our hearts, when we read "Almighty" is to think "All-nourishing, all-providing, and picture God as a nursing mother. It's there in the Hebrew; it's just been lost in translation, and we are richer in our understanding of God if we reclaim it.

There's another word with a feminine root meaning that runs all through scripture, more frequent than *Shaddai*, and that is the word *Racham*, translated "Mercy" or "Compassion." It's in our text for today, "How can I give you up, Ephraim? ... my compassion—my *Racham*-- grows warm and tender."

The root of *Racham* is the word for "womb." The best way to hear what those first listeners heard in Hosea's words, is to add the word "Maternal," to the text, my (maternal) compassion grows warm and tender. Add it every time you read the word mercy or compassion, and you will see how often there is feminine imagery for God in scripture. It occurs again and again and again.

In Exodus we read,

God said, "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show Racham (maternal) mercy on whom I will show (maternal) mercy.

Exodus 33:19,

God spoke through the Prophet Jeremiah,

Is Ephraim my dear son? Is he the child I delight in? As often as I speak against him, I still remember him. Therefore I am deeply moved for him; I will surely have (maternal) mercy on him, says the Lord.

Jeremiah 31:20

The Psalmist declares,

*The Lord is good to all, and his (maternal) compassion
is over all that he has made.*

Ps 145:9

This is not just an attribute of God: but the essence of God. This concept of maternal mercy, of *Racham*, is essential to our understanding of God. The profoundly feminine quality of this part of God's nature is lost to us in translation, but we can reclaim it; and much more.

And we need to. We need to do it with good scholarship, and with care and attention to all of scripture. We need to do this in our worship life, and our prayer life, and our hymnody, and our church school. We need to do this, not just to reclaim the feminine face of God that God has revealed to us, although that is important if we want to be faithful to the Word that has been handed down to us.

But the need goes deeper than that. Because in our efforts to be more inclusive in our language about God, we have often chosen the option of being gender neutral. There is a lot of writing and thinking going around that says God is neither male nor female. In an essay called *Feminine Images for God What Does the Bible Say?* Dr. Margo G. Houts, Professor of Religion and Theology writes, "As we seek to follow biblical inclusivity, let us also affirm the consistent witness of the church, namely, that God is neither feminine nor masculine (gender), neither male nor female (sex)."

But that's not right! It's not Biblical. In Christ we are neither male nor female. But what we see in scripture is a God who is revealed as both male and female. What we know of the Biblical God begins with Genesis
God created humankind in his own image ... male and female.

I had a 5th grader in church school who illustrated this passage by drawing a line across the page, so it made a plane; and drawing God reclining on the line: above the line male with men's clothing and below the line female with women's clothes and her hair streaming down: Male and Female. That's a pretty good Biblical grasp for a 5th grader.

When we try to make our language about God gender neutral, we risk losing the Biblical language and experience of God as Personal. And this is to lose too much.

We talked about this in confirmation this week when one of the students asked as we worked on faith statements,

“What’s the right pronoun for God: He, She or It?”

That’s the danger: that we can be so careful about being gender neutral, that we lose a sense of God as personal. We have no experience of persons without gender. And the Biblical God, the God of the Church, the God of Jesus, is personal. And God forbid that we should ever lose that.

I was once asked my metaphor for prayer, and I realized my experience of prayer is like a small child who backs up to their parent’s knee, and the parent naturally, reflexively, reaches down and draws the child up onto their lap. John once quoted someone who wrote of his father, “There was a space at his side where I fit nicely.” That’s what God is like for me; there is a space at God’s side where I fit nicely. I want our children, and you, to have that experience of God as personal, and present, as loving, as a parent.

I knew a missionary to Japan who said we shouldn’t sing “In Christ there is no East or West;” but “In Christ there is both East and West.” In God there is both male and female, both mother and father.

It’s in the Book; and it’s too important to lose. Amen.