

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
July 31, 2016

"OUR MOTHER WHO ART IN HEAVEN"
by Mary Anne Biggs

Hosea 11:1-11 ~ Luke 12:13-21

When I was in seminary I attended a "Reimagining Conference" that was held by a group of feminist theologians and clergy. My email address was obviously lifted from my registration form because for a couple of years thereafter I received angry online newsletters from other groups who were apoplectic that these feminists wanted to put God in a dress once in a while. The presenters at the conference wanted women to have something to relate to other than the traditional patriarchal picture of God as a *domineering rich white male father/king/warrior*. They felt that maybe our traditional picture of God as the *domineering rich white male father/king/warrior* might have something to do with the abuse of women ... and mistreatment of people of color ... and hatred towards gays and lesbians ... and the lust for dominance and the romance with violence in our society. They felt that a feminine God would be more about relationship and harmony in the human family. But God in a dress? An effeminate God? You might see why this conference had some folks going postal and drawing their big Bibles from their zippered scabbards to press the attack.

Nothing could be more sacred than our image of God ... by which we justify ourselves ... and give ourselves permission for the way we arrange our world and conduct our relationships. Why, might not everything be different if we reimagined God as having a feminine side ... nurturing, compassionate, gentle, kind, inclusive, tenderhearted ... connecting instead of competing ... welcoming instead of rejecting ... vulnerable instead of overbearing?

Well, let me share a secret with you. Don't let the writers of those vitriolic newsletters in on this or you might get whacked by one of those really big leather bound Oxford King James Versions ... with explanatory notes ... and Holy Land maps ... and the words of Jesus marked in red. Here's the secret ... the Bible *abounds* in different images of God. Yes, God is described as a father. God is also a king. The psalmist says "Our God is a mighty God of war." But those aren't the only descriptions of God in scripture. Sometimes God is a beast. God is a lion. God is a bear. God is a clucking chicken, like a mother hen gathering her chicks. Sometimes, God is a natural force. God is the wind. God is the sun. God is a rock. God is a volcano. God is a storm. Most of these biblical depictions of God are functional: God is the Creator. God is the Savior. God is the Advocate. In fact, in the Bible God is the Judge, the prosecuting attorney, and the counsel for the defense in the cosmic court of law. God is an author. God is a friend. God is a smelly old shepherd.

And folks, some of these biblical images of God are ... now, don't tell anybody! ... *feminine!* Humanity is made in the image of God ... male AND female! That must mean that God is female, too, right? God is Sophia, or "Wisdom," a feminine noun. Jesus says God is a woman looking for a lost coin. And God is birth mother to a people. I'm not saying these feminine

images of God predominate. But in a patriarchal culture, and in a monotheistic faith trying to separate itself from the polytheistic fertility cults, the fact that *any* feminine images of God survive make them extremely significant.

Take our text for today from Hosea. God is pictured as a mother grieving over her rebellious child. Hosea uses strong maternal imagery in the Hebrew:

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 (Hosea 11:1-4).

Every mother whose heart has been broken by a wayward child can identify with God here. In the long night waiting by the window and wondering where your child might be, you remember your hopes and dreams for them ... the days of innocence and simple dependence ... nursing them when they were ill ... teaching him to walk ... lifting her to your cheek ... and remembering ... your heart breaks. Your heart breaks. You reach the end of the rope.

They shall return to the land of Egypt, and Assyria shall be their king, because they have refused to return to me. The sword rages in their cities, it consumes their oracle-priests, and devours because of their schemes. My people are bent on turning away from me. To the Most High they call, but he does not raise them up at all (Hosea 11:5-7).

Grief becomes anger, and a warm heart finally turns to stone. In Israel's covenant law a rebellious child was condemned to death! And Israel deserves to die for its long rebellion against God. It is a very human image of God, this mother's grief come to anger ... profound, poignant, and isn't it true? Without this passage ... without this surprisingly feminine imagery ... our picture of God would be incomplete.

But I have to be honest with you. Some of the images of God defined by the post-Christian feminists of the "Reimagining Conference" were as offensive to me as the domineering white male God described by the Bible beaters. Don't tell them I said so or they might beat me senseless with their hard bound Jesus Seminar Bibles with the three authentic words of Jesus marked in red and the rest in Technicolor degrees of speculation. But I am grateful to these feminist theologians for reminding us of the many and varied images of God in the scripture.

I am grateful because hearing these images makes God more and that lets me be more. Too often, as J. B. Phillips once said it, our God is too small. I want to tell the defenders of God's masculinity to read the book before they hit me with it. For God's sake, read the book! On what basis would we choose some images of God as the essence of the Divine character ... but others as passing incidentals? We don't even notice most of these metaphors, because we have been so conditioned to think of God only as a *domineering rich white male father/king/warrior*. Many of the images we no longer understand ... our culture and customs being so different. For instance, when a group of students from Garrett Evangelical Seminary were working to develop a curriculum to expand children's images of God, they discovered that the children's only

associations with the word "shepherd" was of German shepherds! They were thinking of God as Rin Tin Tin! (Well, God is "dog" spelled backwards. And I think rather often we have our image of God turned backwards. And I have long believed that dogs were God's visual aids for unconditional love!)

Worst of all, we choose one or two biblical descriptions of God and elevate them over others because they suit *our* purposes. We wind up making God in our image and take God's name in vain by molding God to our political and social agendas. In the Bible God is always surprising us by being different than what we expected ... like disciplining us when we presume upon the Divine grace and become oblivious to God's concerns for the poor and marginalized among us ... or forgiving us and restoring us when we have failed God in major ways ... or coming to us in human form ... not as a conquering warrior, but as a fragile little baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger ... or as a tortured, crucified criminal ... or as one once dead, now risen. Who would have "thunk" it? I wonder sometimes ... in this battle over how we will describe God ... whether the prohibition against graven images ... shouldn't also apply to those mental images of God that we worship ... as if they were carved in stone. Here again the Hosea text helps us.

Hosea describes God as this grieving mother turned angry and punishing. But suddenly, God has a change of heart. Listen carefully:

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? (These two cities had been destroyed along with Sodom and Gomorrah) My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath (Hosea 11:8-9).

God is described by the Bible in anthropomorphic terms ... as having human features and feelings. God delivers Israel with a mighty outstretched arm. God has a heart. God is pleased. God gets angry. The literal Hebrew idiom for this is that "God's nose turns red." But these are metaphors ... analogies to our human experience. God is always more than our language can contain, even our biblical language. "I am God and no mortal, the Holy ("Wholly Other") One in your midst."

Not all images of God are appropriate. Not all are biblical or Christian. On the other hand, no two or three are by themselves enough. Maybe you need to expand your mind a bit ... meditate on some of these other biblical pictures of God ... pray to "Our Mother who art in heaven" once in a while. Maybe you will discover the God who isn't pleased with a few of your false idols. Maybe you will connect with the God whose heart breaks to be close to you. Maybe you will find the God who wants us all to live as her children, in peace.

At a racial reconciliation workshop that I attended in Chicago we gathered in small groups of mixed ethnicity to share our reflections and experiences. One African American woman had a visceral reaction towards me because I disclosed to the group that I was a pastor. She had grown up Christian, but every Bible she got her hands on had pictures of a lily white Jesus with his lily white disciples doing lily white things. I expressed my heartbreak over this, and pointed out that

the only white people in the Bible to speak of are the Romans, and we all know what they did to Jesus. An Asian American woman almost leapt out of her seat. "Am I in your Bible?" she asked me. She wasn't angry, but plaintive, almost pleading. "Am I in your Bible? Are my people in your Bible, too?"

"Red, and Yellow, Black and White - they are precious in his sight." Our children sing this but do we really teach them what this song means? Male and female, gay and straight, rich and poor, tall and short ... all are made in the image of God, who is big enough and diverse enough to include us all ... and still be more than all we can imagine or speak. God is always more than we can know.

So don't let anybody beat you up with the Bible. Take the time to read it. It tells us of a God who is surprising ... who is always bigger than the boxes in which we try to confine her ... more awesome, more inclusive, more loving than any of his defenders have ever pictured God to be. Read the book, my friends! This is a God you can trust. This is a God with heart. This is a God who loves you like only a mother can. May we pray?

God beyond all words and names,

Forgive us when we try to make you over in our image so we can run others over with our agendas. Forgive us when we use your name in vain to despise those who are different. Surely we are all the rebellious children Hosea described. The feminists, the fundamentalists, and all of us in between still haven't grasped the magnitude of your love and how it breaks your heart to see us worship idols of our own making or damage enemies of our own self-interest. Expand our vision. Make us humble. Teach us to forgive, reclaim, redeem people the way you do. And give us hearts like your own, risking grief in order to love. Amen