

Images of God

Text: John 4:1-42

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on August 15, 2021

As you remember, across the summer I've been preaching from questions or topics you submit—and you can still do that, by the way. Today's question came as "What's wrong with calling God, 'Father?'" So, to kick that off, I chose John 4:1-42, a passage where Jesus repeatedly does just that. I disagree with the premise of the question. It's not "wrong" to call God "Father." But I think there are some serious issues if we **only** call God "Father," and I think this story of Jesus with the Samaritan woman at the well gives us a good touchstone for exploring them. So, first up, some context for the story you just heard.

The setup is that Jesus and his disciples are moving from Judea in southern Israel to Galilee in the north. That route usually took longer than it needed to, because Samaria sat in the middle of the two regions. Jews and Samaritans in the first century were bitter rivals so, rather than set foot on Samaritan soil, when Jews traveled north and south, they crossed the Jordan River and went through the desert, taking the long way around to avoid crossing the border.

So, it's breaking a taboo when Jesus marches himself and the disciples right into Samaria and up to a well in the city of Sychar where he sends the disciples go to find some lunch. This also wasn't just any well. This well was famous for being the place where Abraham's grandson Jacob had dug a well about 2,000 years before Jesus was born. That well today now sits within the complex of an Eastern Orthodox monastery in the city of Nablus, which is in the West Bank.

Here at one of Samaria's most sacred locations, Jesus continues the taboo smashing by engaging with a Samaritan woman with a pretty robust marital history. Jesus asks her for a drink, which would have meant sharing from her cup, and she is as shocked about it all as anybody. "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" But, no matter, if Jesus wants to have a conversation with her, then she's game. They begin talking.

Even though we never learn her name, this conversation is, the longest conversation Jesus has with anybody in the entire Bible. It's also a substantive conversation. She's not cowed when Jesus lets her know he's aware of her history. She comes right back at him with one of the key points of tension between Jews and Samaritans—the proper location of worship. The Samaritans worshiped on Mt. Gerazim, the Jews in Jerusalem. She throws down the challenge and Jesus engages with her, just as he does with his disciples, the Pharisees, or anybody else in any of the Gospels.

With that as background, let's weave in the question about calling God, "Father." Remember back at the end of May when we talked about the Trinity and how John's use of the word "Son" is a metaphor? Well, it's the same with addressing God as "Father." God is not Jesus' literal father any more than Jesus is God's literal son. They're both metaphors, and the support for that—apart from just common sense and the traditional understanding of the Trinity in Christian doctrine—is in this story.

The first exchange Jesus has with the woman at the well is very similar to the exchange he has with Nicodemus in the chapter before. The content is different, but in both cases, Jesus is trying to stop people from taking his words literally. In chapter 3, the learned Pharisee Nicodemus, who helped to govern the religious life of Israel, hears Jesus say, "you must be born again" and tries to get his brain

around a grown man crawling back into his mother's womb. That leaves Jesus astounded that someone with the stature and education of Nicodemus has apparently checked his brain at the door: "Are you a leader of Israel and you don't know these things?" Jesus says.

Here in John 4, a likely illiterate Samaritan woman makes the same mistake, this time about water. Jesus says he could offer the woman "living water." In a literal sense, "living water" meant running water, like a river rather than a well or a spring or pool. She, too, jumps to the literal words and says, "Yeah, give me that so I don't have to come here every day to draw water. I'll take the faucet in the house for sure!" Nope, that's not what he meant. Just like being "born again," the phrase "living water" is a metaphor.

And then the disciples come back with lunch. Spanning the range of the educated tax collector, Matthew, to unlearned fishermen like Peter, when Jesus tells them he has food to eat they don't know about, they're checking his pockets and wondering what Samaritan could possibly have shown a Jewish man hospitality and given him food. Jesus again has to stop and correct them. "My food is to do the will of the one who sent me."

So, within two chapters you have Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, and the disciples all making the mistake of taking Jesus literally, when he's actually speaking in metaphors. And what's true in those stories around the edges is even more manifest in the heart of Jesus' conversation with the woman. Who's right about where we're supposed to worship—the Jews or the Samaritans? Jesus does answer and sides with the Jews; but then he quickly points out that the whole argument is beside the point: "The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

With those words, Jesus obliterates all the debates about the technical and material aspects of our worship; then and now. God is spirit and asks that our worship simply be filled with the spirit of truth—no matter who we are, no matter how or where we do it, no matter what words we use to address that great Spirit who is beyond our ability to fully understand or articulate.

Our only tools for talking about spiritual matters are metaphors, and the Bible gives us many: It's a treasure in a field, a pearl of great price; it's like a kingdom; it's like a city; it's like a garden. And encountering it is like being born again or drinking from a clear river of living water. Picking just one of those metaphors would be unwise and unhelpful. We see where the sole focus on "born again" has landed us. It's a great metaphor, but no one metaphor can contain the whole. The more diversity we have, the closer we can get.

It's the same with the metaphors used to describe God. The Bible is packed full of wildly diverse images of God. "Father" is a wonderful one, but picking **only** that one has had unintended consequences. The problem might be easier for us to see if we think about what might have happened if we had picked one of the others instead.

Psalms 62 calls God "the rock of my salvation." That's a great metaphor. But what if we'd spent the last 2,000 years **only** addressing God as a rock. Sure, we'd understand God to be strong and a source of shelter. But we might also begin to see God as impersonal and unmoved by our prayers or our fears. Imagine growing up in the church from infancy with only the image of God as a rock. Would we easily think of God as compassionate? Forgiving?

But the Bible doesn't give us just one metaphor. Rock works for some situations, but not for others. In Exodus 19, God is also the eagle who raises the Hebrew slaves up on her wings, riding the air currents high above the earth to freedom. But what if "Great Eagle" was the only way we addressed God for millennia? What if every infant was only given the image of God as an eagle? I think we might end up more detached from the world around us. We might come to see faith as an escape instead of the path to engagement with others. And I shudder to think of learning to see God only in terms of a majestic predator.

Jesus says, "I am the vine, you are the branches." I can hear Nicodemus now. "So...we're all plants, then?" What if our only image of God was vegetation? Supple, nourishing, sure; but no match for a John Deere or a chain saw. Jesus also likens himself to a hen wanting to gather her chicks under her wings. He says he is a gate to a sheepfold. God appears in the Bible as cloud and fire and whirlwind. The Holy Spirit is feminine in the Hebrew Scriptures—wisdom personified as a woman. Each one adds more nuance to our understanding of God; any one of them alone turns the living God into an idol of stone.

Which is not to say there's anything wrong with having our own preferences as individuals. That's part of the point—we come from different places and find our connection to God more easily through some images than through others. In the Gospels, Jesus does prefer to address God as "Father," many times using the more intimate term "Abba," the equivalent of "Daddy." Doesn't that make it the right thing for us? Well, we believe Jesus was fully divine AND fully human. Guess who disappears from the Gospel story after Jesus turns 12? Joseph. Could it be that the humanity of Jesus was drawn to the metaphor of God as a father because he missed and needed a replacement for his own?

Throughout the Bible, we have an enormous array of images for God. The discussion with the Samaritan woman makes plain that all of that is metaphor. God is spirit—not animal, vegetable, or mineral. Not male or female. Not Jew or Samaritan; not Christian or Hindu or Sikh. True worship will lift us beyond those distinctions. But because we keep taking Jesus' words literally—just like Nicodemus, the woman at the well, and his disciples on many occasions—we grabbed onto "Father" as the only acceptable way to address God and shoved all the rest of those glorious images out. And it has hurt us.

One set of people it's hurt are those who've had abusive, negligent, or otherwise delinquent fathers. For them, it's nearly impossible to reconcile a loving God with their own experience of their fathers; and when we insist that's how God always must be viewed and addressed, we either re-traumatize people or they, understandably, decide to love themselves enough to leave the church. It's not really a picnic for fathers either, who bear the burden of having to perfectly embody the love of God or shoulder the outsized and unfair risk of ruining a child's faith.

The insistence that God can only be viewed and addressed as a father has also done extraordinary damage to women. It's set the norm for only male authority in the church; and millennia of such a focus has discounted and diminished the equally valid, but decidedly different, way that women exercise leadership, solve problems, and foster cooperation in the world. It's led to turning a blind eye to violence against women and to normalizing economic hardship, not just for women but for every society that doesn't elevate our gifts for the benefit of the whole.

That's just the tip of the iceberg. Many, many books have been written on the impact on women of viewing God solely as Father. I've been on the pointy end of that stick all my life. People ask me if there's sexism in the church and I respond, "Only on days that end in y." But as we rush to scrub the "Father" and male language from our texts and liturgies, I urge us to proceed with caution. If we'd been raised only viewing and addressing God as Mother, we'd have the same set of problems in reverse. And, in part because of the limitations of English, if we leave out pronouns for God altogether, we're back to the issues of God as an impersonal rock. I think there's a better way.

When it comes right down to it, Jesus tells the woman at the well, God is spirit, which can manifest as anything. God can—and I believe does—take an enormous variety of forms, because humanity is diverse and God becomes known to us in whatever way speaks most clearly to us. That's what a loving God would do. If seeing God as a father is an obstacle because of your own life's experience, then try mother, or eagle, or rock, or vine, or gate...even a chicken. Our liturgies in our lives together shouldn't be this or that image; they should be this **and** that and this other thing and many more than any one of us can imagine alone.

Once we understand that "Father" is a metaphor—that God is not literally male, and a dad; once we realize that God can show up as literally anything on earth; think about what that could mean for our children and the world. If God can be a rock or a mother hen; a father or a vine; an eagle or a thundercloud—if we taught that to our children from infancy—would scientists need to issue a Code Red for Humanity?

Might such children grow to see a forest as a manifestation of the sacred instead of a commodity for harvest? Laying hens are some of the most abused animals in all of our farming industries. If we'd been raised to imagine Jesus as a mother hen, would that still happen? If God might be in a cloud, would we be so quick to pollute it? If God might be manifest in women and children just as frequently as men, would their gifts, talents, and opinions start to matter equally? Might we begin to recognize the image of God that Genesis tells us is inside each one of us? Might suicide rates drop as we recognize our own sacred worth—that we, broken as we are, can still be a vessel for God's spirit?

We will never in this life grasp the entirety of God; but every time we use a different metaphor for God, our understanding of God expands. And every time our understanding of God expands, we become a little more humble, as we realize yet another aspect of God's nature that we had never really considered before. How many more revelations might there be? A burning bush? A babe in a manger?

It was six men of Indostan, to learning much inclined,
who went to see the elephant (Though all of them were blind),
that each by observation, might satisfy his mind.

The first approached the elephant, and, happening to fall,
against his broad and sturdy side, at once began to bawl:
"God bless me! but the elephant, is very like a wall!"

The second feeling of the tusk, cried: "Ho! what have we here,
so very round and smooth and sharp? To me tis mighty clear,
this wonder of an elephant, is very like a spear!"

The third approached the animal, and, happening to take,
the squirming trunk within his hands, thus boldly up and spake.

"I see," quoth he, the elephant is very like a snake!"

The fourth reached out his eager hand, and felt about the knee:
"What most this wondrous beast is like, is mighty plain," quoth he;
"Tis clear enough the elephant is very like a tree."

The fifth, who chanced to touch the ear, Said; "E'en the blindest man
can tell what this resembles most; Deny the fact who can,
This marvel of an elephant, is very like a fan!"

The sixth no sooner had begun, about the beast to grope,
than, seizing on the swinging tail, that fell within his scope,
"I see," quoth he, "the elephant is very like a rope!"

And so these men of Indostan, disputed loud and long,
each in his own opinion, exceeding stiff and strong,
Though each was partly in the right, and all were in the wrong!

So, oft in theologic wars, the disputants, I ween,
rail on in utter ignorance, of what each other mean,
and prate about an elephant, not one of them has seen!

Amen.

*Concluding poem is a rendering of an Indian folktale by John Godfrey Saxe (1816-1887)