

July 25, 2021

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Answers the question: In worship, I've noticed we use gender neutral language for God and avoid using pronouns for God. Why?

So when we realized a week or so ago that most of our staff and volunteer staff would be out this morning Miss Callie suggested that we just turn this morning into a little chit chat with mimosa's. I have to confess I didn't find the time to get a mimosa station out at the welcome center this morning, I really dropped the ball on that one. Perhaps next time Kelley is away we can make that a thing. All the same this morning we will endeavor to answer the question about why we typically don't use pronouns for God, and why we use gender neutral language for God especially during worship here at DCC. But before we get into all that I am wondering some other things.

I am wondering this morning what your first image or experience of God was. My mom has always told me the story of when I was about two or three and we were visiting my grandparents church when my grandfather began singing a solo, in his deep bravado voice. The story

goes that I looked up from my coloring sheet and asked her, is that God? You see, I couldn't see over the pew to know it was just my grandpa and so this deep voice in the middle of this massive sanctuary must be God. Here recently Kelley and Hadley had an important conversation about God too, it centered around the Native American art behind my desk. In it there is a village of people working, playing and living. Then hovering above the village is a beautiful woman and Hadley without being prompted asked Kelley who that was? Kelley in all her wisdom asked Hadley who she thought it was and Hadley asked if the native American woman was God? She still tells me that she is God every time she is in the office. I think our experiences and early images of God often inform who we envision God to be, and not just on the level of whether God is male or female, though that too, but even what the nature of God is like. These first images of God inform what we know to be true about God or at the very least begins to build the early framework for how we understand and access God. So, I am wondering what is your earliest image of God? Was it a sweet Sunday school

teacher who welcomed you gently and taught you the stories of the bible slipping you an extra vanilla wafer at snack time? Was it a loving grandparent who offered you the opportunity to pray over dinner? Or even still what images over time have brought you a sense of who God is? In my high school church, there was an older gentleman with white hair who always wore cashmere sweaters. He was loving and always asked me about school and work and the sports I was in. It was a difficult period of my life having just moved to Ohio and not finding it easy to make friends and somehow his kindness and his literal softness felt week in and week out, there was a safe place to land. So, again I ask – though not in a chit chat format since I didn't provide the proper beverages what is your earlier image of God? And what have been other images of God along the journey? What is your foundation for understanding and accessing God? Not where you are at now, but where have you come from?

Now, we all know, as humans we grow and we evolve and we have life experiences in which often even that early framework needs

to be reassessed or thrown away completely. Some of us hold images that still work to our ever-evolving theology and some of us have had to reimagine or discard the early images we were given because of their destructive nature or because that just isn't the image that best represents who we have come to know God to be. Perhaps we have reach points in our lives when we need more from the Holy than what our original foundation can provide. As I explored my own call to ministry, I needed more than the booming bravado of a Baptist grandfather who was both sexist and homophobic. He loved me as best he could, but a woman's place just wasn't in the pulpit so much as it was in the primary Sunday school classroom. Or, as I struggled with my own diagnosis of Lupus and then cancer, I needed a God who was more than puppeteer doling out health or illness to the children of God on a whim. So my second question for you this morning is – what is your favorite image of God now?

The bible offers us many rich and diverse images of God. Psalm 31 – offers us the image of God as a rock, fortress and provider. In Isaiah

we see God described as a peacemaker. In Jeremiah God is a potter, In much of the bible we see God described as a Father. There are also many, many images of God as a mother. Hosea describes God as a mother bear, “Like a bear robbed of her cubs I will attack them and turn them asunder..” in Deuteronomy the writer describes God as a mother eagle, “Like the eagle that stirs up its nest, and hovers over its young, God spreads wings to catch you, and carries you..” In Matthew and Luke we are given images of a mother hen, “How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings..” So on this day I am wondering where you are right now? What is your favorite image of God?

One of my favorite images of God comes from the fictional book the Shack. Papa, is one facet of the three-part God depicted in the novel. When you finally meet Papa in the story you learn that Papa also calls herself “Elousia,” which Jesus explains means “the Creator God. She fills the role of “the father” in the trinity, but challenges many of the conventions of that role. Initially, Papa appears as a middle-aged

black woman, quick to make jokes and jabs—much to the surprise of Mack, the main character of the book, who had always pictured God as an aloof, Gandalf-esque old white man. Papa says she has assumed the familiar name used by Mack’s wife Nan to help Mack identify her with God, but has taken on an unexpected appearance to help Mack get around some of his assumptions about religion. Further challenging Mack’s assumptions, Papa does not use shame, guilt, or violent punishment. Instead, she encourages Mack and all human beings to recognize her love and to trust that, though she can create positive outcomes from tragedies, she does not cause tragedies to happen.

While fictional I think the thing that I like the most about this image is how surprising it is. A black woman who answers to Eloisia or even Papa. It’s out of my realm of the booming voice singing in that Baptist church, and it is different from God the Father I was taught to pray to in Sunday school. It even goes beyond my own visions of a loving mother God. This image of God equally challenges and comforts me. It offers nuance to who God is and depth and breadth to the

character of God. So what is your favorite image of God? And as you think on that let's really dive into the question.

My first class in seminary was with the Rev. Dr. Lisa Davison. In fact, I think I was in her first Hebrew Bible class at Phillips and let's just say that semester we as students left much to be desired. We were all so brand new to theological education. However, it was in that class that I was first handed her "Just Language Covenant". This covenant was something she used for all her classes and ended up being a writing that would inform all my class work in seminary and the practice of ministry far beyond seminary. It is really Dr. D. who answers today's question because she first answered the question for me. The short answer to the question before us today is this: In worship we use gender neutral names for God and avoid using pronouns because worship is the time in which we ALL gather together. Me with my image of God as a black woman named Papa, and you with your grandfather image of God, her with her image of God as more spiritual or more as a presence, and him with his deeply engrained image of God as a mother.

In worship, we come to worship together. And so, by using gender neutral names for the Holy, we allow everyone a place to be included and represented. We leave room for all in the gathered community to be able to access God.

However, there is also biblical reasoning for this. As Dr. Davison points out at least for the Israelites, “to know someone’s name was to have some intimate information about who that person was. Nowhere was the power of naming more important and dangerous than in human attempts to name the Divine. When Moses asked to know God’s name, he was given a phrase that defied translation and comprehension. The phrase he was given, maintained the mystery of the God who calls humanity into covenant. Similarly, when Jacob wrestled with the Divine stranger, he demanded a name, but instead Jacob received a new name.

Still, humans have used words to speak of God and of their experiences of God. Hagar, the only person in the Hebrew Bible to “name” God, called the Divine ““el roi”, which reflected her experience

of having been seen by a God who took notice of her suffering and who gave her a blessing. Recognizing the inherent danger of limiting God through human words, the Israelites were careful not to solidify their God into one image or name.”

Dr. Davison continues, “In speaking in a gathered community, use of only one image for God not only limits God but also may prevent others, who find that one image unhelpful or disturbing, from hearing the power of the Gospel.” So today, by offering a variety of non-gendered names and images of God in worship we are both offering space for everyone’s personal image to be maintained and stretching our imaginations and experiences of God whose nature and goodness is larger than we can even imagine it. We are offering access to the God who loves each and every one of us gathered and not yet gathered, no matter our favorite image of God.

Furthermore, Dr D makes this note about pronouns for God that we find in the bible. “In the biblical languages (i.e., Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek), nouns were given a grammatical gender, much like we see

in the Spanish language (like , masculine and feminine.) For example, in Hebrew the word for “city” is feminine, and the word for “house” is masculine; however, a city is not female nor is a house male. The English language no longer utilizes grammatical gender for nouns. Unfortunately, though, most translations of the Bible into English were done without a consideration for this difference. Thus, when translating the words given above, many English Bibles refer to a city as “she” rather than the more common English pronoun, “it.”³

Similarly, in referring to God (‘el), which is a masculine noun in Hebrew, most English translations use the pronoun “he”, when “it” would have been just as grammatically accurate. Given Israel’s firm confession that their God did not have a sexual identity (male or female), it is highly unlikely that an obviously male pronoun, like “he”, would have been used to refer to God. In the New Testament Greek does have a neuter form for nouns and pronouns, however this identification is also a grammatical one and not one of sex.

In order to avoid this misconception, it is more accurate to use the word “God” when referring to God.” So, when we in worship, avoid using pronouns for God it is because we are doing our best to be true to the text and again to make God accessible to all.

Now, let’s be clear about one thing before we wrap things up for today. If your image of God works for you, that is wonderful. I am so thankful that you have found a rich image of God that hopefully both challenges and comforts you. An image of God that encourages you to live in the ways of Jesus. We are called to always expand our image of God and that is good and fruitful work, but if God being a Father, or male, or white, or black or female, or spirit rather than any of those human descriptions works for you, than I am so thankful that you have landed on an image that allows you to access God. In your own spiritual life I hope you will continue to connect with God and with your own image of God.

Our own images of God only become problematic when we allow them to be THE image of God for us and for everyone. For example, If

God as a male works for you there is nothing wrong with that until it doesn't work for your neighbor, and you still insist that they too access God as male. Our job as Christians is not to define God. Our job as Christians is to be sure that everyone has access to the love of God. To the grace of God to the all the goodness of God. Some people won't be able to get there if that love is only offered by a male God. Some people won't be able to see the goodness of God if we insist that God must be white or democratic, or republican, or whatever parameters we have decided to put on or around God.

As Christians who want to build the kingdom of God by extravagantly welcoming others to join us, by focusing on hospitality and making space for all, then we must be willing to admit that our understanding our image of God is not the only one. We must be willing to hold space for more diverse images of God and be a community that welcomes all images and is in conversation about how the many diverse images might just reveal something about the character of God that we hadn't considered before. May we be people who continue to

do the work to reveal the loving nature of God, who continue to make
space and God accessible to all.

Amen.