

Zoe and Sophia - The Feminine was Here from the Beginning
Sermon by Pedro Silva II

W O M A N - Nikki Giovanni

she wanted to be a blade
of grass amid the fields
but he wouldn't agree
to be a dandelion

she wanted to be a robin singing
through the leaves
but he refused to be
her tree

she spun herself into a web
and looking for a place to rest
turned to him
but he stood straight
declining to be her corner

she tried to be a book
but he wouldn't read

she turned herself into a bulb
but he wouldn't let her grow

she decided to become
a woman
and though he still refused
to be a man
she decided it was all
right

by Nikki Giovanni

Scripture:
Proverbs 4:1-13

Hear, *my* children, the instruction of a father,
And give attention to know understanding;

²For I give you good doctrine:

Do not forsake my law.

³When I was my father's son,

Tender and the only one in the sight of my mother,

⁴He also taught me, and said to me:

“Let your heart retain my words;

Keep my commands, and live.

⁵Get wisdom! Get understanding!

Do not forget, nor turn away from the words of my mouth.

⁶Do not forsake her, and she will preserve you;

Love her, and she will keep you.

⁷Wisdom *is* the principal thing;

Therefore get wisdom.

And in all your getting, get understanding.

⁸Exalt her, and she will promote you;

She will bring you honor, when you embrace her.

⁹She will place on your head an ornament of grace;

A crown of glory she will deliver to you.”

¹⁰Hear, my son, and receive my sayings,

And the years of your life will be many.

¹¹I have taught you in the way of wisdom;

I have led you in right paths.

¹²When you walk, your steps will not be hindered,

And when you run, you will not stumble.

¹³Take firm hold of instruction, do not let go;

Keep her, for she *is* your life.

Sermon

Let Us Pray.

Father-Mother God who made us One, may your unifying Spirit breathe through the words spoken today for the building up and revelation of your Beloved Community. In the nature of Christ we pray. Amen.

In the past few conversations we've had, my goal has been to encourage us to go deeper into our relationship with God through first acknowledging that being in the image and likeness of God includes all of the invisible attributes of what makes us, us. Secondly, we looked at what it means for us to allow ourselves to be listened into being and to likewise listen others into being. And finally, we talked about living from what I called a Spiritocracy, which manifests itself by overcoming evil with the good work of knowing who you are as a child of God and sharing that knowledge with others by treating them equally as children of God.

As many of you know, after the shooting at King Soopers, I felt called to focus the time I have in ministry on cultivating, demonstrating, and extending the invitation to create spaces for being a non-anxious presence. It is my conviction that this is the gift that the church can be to the world that people can't readily find elsewhere. In my study of how to implement this, I have looked into family systems and whole brain theory quite a bit.

For those of you unfamiliar with those terms, Family Systems Theory is essentially, as described by Murray Bowen, a **theory of human behavior** that defines the family unit as a complex social system in which members interact to influence each other's behavior. Family members interconnect, making it appropriate to view the system as a whole rather than as individual elements. And family systems theory is not simply limited to families in the conventional sense, but also to organizations and communities.

And Whole Brain Theory, made popular by Ned Herrmann, basically looks at the different ways people make decisions as thinking preferences that are placed in one of four quadrants, analytical, experimental, practical, or relational. According to the Herrmann International website, Applying Whole Brain® Thinking means being able to fully leverage one's own preferences, stretch to other quadrants when necessary, and adapt to and take advantage of the preferences of those around you to improve performance and results.

Now, I am aware that these theories may sound a little heady. But I think that most of us will agree that there is a lot of instability in the world right now. I know I see it. And when I think of the instability, my mind goes to the first chapter of James where the author tells anyone who lacks Wisdom to ask God without being double minded because the double mind is unstable in all its ways.

And so, I think healing the instability begins with the mind and trying to understand where the instability began.

Last week, I began the sermon with the last line of a poem I had written called God's Plan back in 2002. That line was, "The world was already perfect before our struggle to make it so." And I ended the sermon by sharing the first line which was, "It started in the beginning and it ended in the beginning."

And I invited you to consider the possibility that as citizens of the Spiritocracy, our work here is to make contact with the beginning--the world that was already perfect before our struggle to make it so and live it into the present moment with God and the rest of Creation.

As I also shared, I have come to agree with Richard Rohr that seeing everyone as children of God and treating them as such could save the world. And so, in service of that aim, I want us to go again to the beginning of the Bible to explore what may be in large part, the narrative root of much of the Western world's division--the separation of the masculine and feminine aspects of what it means to be human.

In his book, *The Word According to Eve*, Cullen Murphy recounts Elizabeth Cady Stanton's critique in her introduction to *The Woman's Bible*, where she says:

The Bible teaches that woman brought sin and death into the world, that she precipitated the fall of the race, that she was arraigned before the judgment seat of heaven, tried, condemned and sentenced. Marriage for her was to be a condition of bondage, maternity a period of suffering and anguish, and in silence and subjection, she was to play the role of a dependent on man's bounty for all her material wants, and for all the information she might desire on the vital questions of the hour, she was commanded to ask her husband at home. Here is the Bible's position of woman briefly summed up.

[Holy Spirit] Am I qualified to discuss this?

Perhaps not. But here is a formative experience that shapes me to this day.

Reginald's Downfall

"Father-Mother God"

Never in my ten years or so of being in church had I heard someone start off a prayer that way. And it was a scandal.

The prayer was prayed by a newly ordained minister in our church. He was not a member of the staff. But, rather, a member of the congregation who had been nurtured in our church and would soon be leaving to serve a nearby church. And here he was blaspheming by suggesting that there was some feminine aspect to the divine.

When I heard the words come out of his mouth, I was instantly intrigued. In fact, I didn't hear anything else he said. And I don't think anyone else did either. The collective gasp was too distracting. You would've thought he said something really crazy like that the white Jesus on our fans weren't what Jesus really looked like or that he didn't speak with a British accent. But he didn't go that far. That was something I would say a little further in the future. No, all he had done was suggest that there was a mothering dimension to the Creator. And with that one word, he lost most of the church.

Later that evening when my family was talking about his betrayal, I spoke up and asked what the big deal was, only to be told that I just didn't get how disrespectful he had been. And I didn't.

"What's wrong with saying 'Mother God'?" I asked innocently. My grandmother tried to explain it to me. But it didn't make sense to me. And I think if she really thought about it, she would have realized that what she was trying to say didn't make sense to her either.

Unfortunately, I hadn't yet learned the term "internalized oppression". Had I known it, I would've told her that that's what I thought must have been going on for a woman to be so upset that a man called God a mother. "If I were her", I thought, "I would've been grateful to him for being that bold to say something so clearly controversial." After all, having grown up in our church, he must've known that him saying "Mother God" would've caused people to react negatively.

But then again, maybe he didn't. One of our church's favorite songs to sing was called, "I Thank You, Jesus" by Kenneth Morris. I loved that song for a lot of reasons--most especially for the gratitude it invoked. But until the young minister said, "Father-Mother God", I never realized that one of the things I enjoyed most about the song was its lyrical and spiritual harmony. Because, in the second verse of the song, Morris used the words:

"(You've been my mother) You've been my mother,

(You've been my father) You've been my father,

You've been my sister, my brother too;" to describe the many ways that Jesus had been there for him on his long spiritual journey. We sang that all of the time.

(You've been my mother) You've been my mother,

(You've been my father) You've been my father,

You've been my sister, my brother too;

How is it that we could sing about Jesus serving us as mother and sister so frequently and yet be aghast--and I never use the word aghast--that this minister dared call God a mother? But everyone who I heard talk about it, both men and women--but most especially the women--who made up the majority of the membership like congregations all over the country, were horrified that he would suggest such a thing.

Some people went so far to suggest that the only reason he would say such a thing was if his own identity was in question. Because, as they saw it, a real man would know better.

As an impressionable young person, I could have easily taken this as a warning to never suggest such an apparent heresy that there was a feminine aspect to the invisible attributes of the Divine that Paul said could be clearly seen by all things created.

But wait a minute, didn't we take the Bible literally? If so, wouldn't that mean that since there were clearly what we called feminine attributes throughout Creation that the feminine must be part and parcel of the Eternal Godhead? And if this were the case, then why was it wrong for this minister to say "Father-Mother God?"

Can someone please make this make sense to me? I want to believe the right thing. I want to please God. If this is how it's supposed to be then I am willing to learn. I want to love God and neighbor as Self. So why is it that out of this love, I feel angry that we, who are judging a person—who we just approved for ordination a few weeks ago—for addressing God as mother, are the same people who tell my mother that she is not allowed to preach as a woman? Is my anger misplaced?

Are we not blessing and cursing at the same time? Am I not doing the same in questioning you, my elders, even if it is only a conversation in my head?

This battle inside of me reminds me of James' teachings on the tongue where it says in Chapter 3:

“7 For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, 8 but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. 9 With it we bless our Creator, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. 10 From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and SISTERS, this ought not to be so. 11 Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? 12 Can a fig tree, my brothers and SISTERS yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more than salt water can yield fresh.”

“My brothers and SISTERS, this ought not to be so.” he says. “This ought not to be so.” And perhaps it is for this reason that he opened this chapter by saying, “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.”

Are you not my teachers, my elders? Am I now judging you? I don’t know. But I have to wonder what you are teaching my young mind when you say that my mother and many women, though blessed with the gift of preaching, cannot stand in your pulpit and proclaim the message that Jesus said would set the captives free? Has nothing changed since midwife and teacher Anne Hutchison was chased out of Massachusetts the Massachusetts Bay Colony? What did they teach the young men and women of those days by how they treated her? What are you teaching me now when all of the language for the Divine is in so-called masculine terms? What are you teaching me and other young people with a blond haired, blue eyed Jesus while telling me he was a Palestinian Jew?

“Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? 12 Can a fig tree, my brothers and SISTERS yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more than salt water can yield fresh.”

“My brothers and SISTERS, this ought not to be so.”

Forgive me God and neighbor if I am speaking out of turn. I am a young man and my years are not full of wisdom. But my mind is full of questions. I am just a child. If there is wisdom in this notion that we are evicting half of humanity from being fully present in the Divine image, make it plain.

I know you may say that it is the order of things. But, my unlearned mind cannot help but inquire, if you are so offended at the thought that the feminine is a co-equal aspect of the Divine, how then can you, out of the same mouth, tell someone who you want to make a Christian who embodies the energy of the feminine that God wants to make God’s home in their heart. What I hear you saying is that somehow the feminine is not good enough to dwell in God and yet God sees fit to dwell in the feminine. I do not understand.

“Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water?
12 Can a fig tree, my brothers and SISTERS yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more than salt water can yield fresh.”

“My brothers and SISTERS, this ought not to be so.”

If I am missing the mark, please correct my aim. Because as the scriptures teach, I want to attain Wisdom. I am looking to you for Wisdom. But in hearing you, I feel like Elihu talking to Job and his friends when he said in frustration:

“I am young in years,

and you are old;

that is why I was fearful,

not daring to tell you what I know.

7 I thought, ‘Age should speak;

advanced years should teach wisdom.’

8 But it is the spirit in a person,

the breath of the Almighty, that gives them understanding.

9 It is not only the old who are wise,

not only the aged who understand what is right.

10 “Therefore I say: Listen to me;

I too will tell you what I know.

And this is what I know, the feminine was here in the beginning with every other invisible attribute of the Creator.

In Proverbs 8:22 it says that Wisdom was with God in the beginning before any created thing took form even the first dust of the earth.

And the name for Wisdom was Sophia, or the feminine personification of the Divine which in the early Christian church was synonymous with the Word of God, as Jesus Christ was referred to, as well as the Holy Spirit. The feminine presence there from the beginning.

Now tell me again why it was such a big deal that that minister said “Father-Mother God”?

As a preteen, that question was never answered to my satisfaction. And so I surrendered it to my sense of wonder, living with the question and allowing it to do its work in my life, as it continues to do. But now, I submit the question to you, a progressive Christian Church in the United Church of Christ.

Now before we go too far, let me just say that as a church that has covenanted to use gender inclusive language, I have no doubt that we would have no problem with someone saying “Father-Mother God in a prayer. I don’t feel like I was taking a risk in beginning my prayer that way as I opened the sermon. So, when I ask that question of us, it is not about whether we can accept the words “Father-Mother God when we hear it on the outside. But more, about whether we have made room for the mothering aspect of God on the inside. And that is what I am inviting us to get curious about today.

In her Bold Cafe article, “God as Mother”, Michelle Terry asks:

What if we thought our relationship with God was less about getting the answers right and more about being like a newborn?

Do you know what the newborns I have cared for love most in life? she asks They love being snuggled and drinking some of mama’s milk. My infant does not know my birthday, my favorite color, or my interests. But he does know my scent, my voice, even my heartbeat. He trusts me absolutely.

What if we imagined our life with God as a time to get close and receive life-giving nourishment? What if we trusted God as an infant trusts her mama?

Can you imagine God’s work in the world as a woman in labor? Labor is painful, but it is also beautiful and miraculous. God’s redemptive activity in the world might cause pain, both to God and to us. But God’s work is also beautiful and miraculous and ultimately produces life.

So let’s do a little experiment.

I invite you to listen to this prayer with as open a heart as possible and witness what arises inside.

Mother God,

You in whose womb we dwelled until in the fullness of time you called us into being. We thank you for birthing us, nurturing us, holding us, and sustaining us with your life giving spirit. Your love for us is like milk for a newborn, giving us

nourishment so that we might thrive in this world that you've created for us and all of your children. May the way you love us be extended through us as we grow in the awareness that all of life is held in your bosom. In the mothering spirit of Christ we pray. Amen.

How did that feel? Were you able to take the prayer into your heart with little or no pause.

Well, I will admit that I wrote the prayer and even after over 30 years of living with this openness to the feminine or mothering aspect of our Creator, I could feel 45 years of indoctrination still creating a resistance in me. In fact, I didn't intend to write a prayer. I tried to find a Christian prayer online that exclusively focused on God as Mother and couldn't find one.

What I did find however, was a Guardian article from 10 years ago saying how big of a controversy it was that the Methodist Church in England had become the first mainstream church to address God as "our Father and our Mother" in a common prayer.

Now, I know that some of us might be wondering why this matters. We all know now that God is not a white man in the sky with a long white beard throwing lightning bolts at all who offend him. So why stir the pot. But here's why.

As. Rev. Neil Dixon stressed in the above mentioned article,

"God is not a person. God is spirit and without gender. [But] the fact that we've used male imagery so extensively has in a sense reinforced the picture of God as a man, and the fact that Jesus is male has done that as well. But, if all human beings are created in God's image, feminine as well as masculine attributes must reflect God's nature."

There are three types of Life:

Bios -Life that animates the body

Psuche - which is where we get the word psyche and is for the most part the life of this world--the mental life where we concern ourselves with the troubles of this world. It is the life of the flesh or the sarx that I talked about last week. This is the life that Jesus said he would lay down.

Zoe- this is the third type of life. This is the life that Jesus offered his disciples and consequently us. It is the word that is used for eternal life and it is a word that describes a feminine attribute of the divine. Used 125 times more the word

bios, in the Bible and in fact in the Greek translation of the Bible, Eve is named Zoe. And because, I can't seem to go a sermon lately without quoting C.S. Lewis, in Mere Christianity, he said:

"The Spiritual life which is in God from all eternity, and which made the whole natural universe, is *Zoe*. *Bios* has, to be sure, a certain shadowy or symbolic resemblance to *Zoe*: but only the sort of resemblance there is between a photo and a place, or a statue and a man. A man who changed from having *Bios* to having *Zoe* would have gone through as big a change as a statue which changed from being a carved stone to being a real human."

Sisters, Brothers, and Friends, we have been called to be real humans living a real life that is not divorced from the Oneness of our Creator in whom all beautiful aspects dwell and none outshines the other. But all find a home. In short, we are called to wholeness.

But we cannot live in wholeness and not acknowledge that how we treat the feminine is how we treat the world. We call our home Mother Earth and look at how we treat Her. We say that women are treated equally, but look at the pay disparity or worse yet, the trafficking of young women around the world. And if a woman succeeds navigating the social minefield in the limited somewhat progressive countries where it is possible, they are tokenized as proof of progress and as John Gray said they are told that, "A wealthy woman can only get empathy from a wealthy psychiatrist."

Well as a father of daughters and a man who is working to integrate the mind God gave me that is comprised of both masculine and feminine aspects, I want to add my energy to transformation of these things that ought not to be and I want to invite you to join me in this work of reconciling our minds.

[Holy Spirit]

Teresa of Avila said Christ has no body now on earth but ours.

Julian of Norwich, "A mother's is the most intimate, willing and dependable of all services, because it is the truest of all. None has ever been able to fulfill it properly but Christ.

So as followers of this Christ, let us all seek to integrate all that is motherly so that we might more fully express the attributes of the invisible yet fully present God.

I think Paul said it quite well when he said from the Beginner's Mind, "Now there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

May we seek to have such a mind in all of our relations.

[Holy Spirit]

Joyce Lebra - Receiving an Award from the Japan on September 8th for her contributions to

Shirley Whiteley - Pearl Harbor

Jeanette Ford - Archivist Bible

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[Holy Spirit]