

In the Presence of the One Who Comforts Us as One Whom a Mother Comforts

The Value of Feminine Images of God in Pastoral Prayer and Liturgy

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"The Hammock's Song"

Swaying gently
the hammock sings her song:
"It's all right.
It's all right.
It's all right."
Cradled in her maternal movement,
seeing my world reflected
in the blue eyes of Creation's sky,
feeling myself once again
in the arms of the One
"who comfortest us
as one whom his mother comforteth,"
my angers and anxieties melt
as I begin to believe her song.
"Yes! It's all right.
It's all right.
It's all right."
Did Isaiah lie in a hammock?
Or did he just know the motherness of God?

The refreshing, restoring experience of feeling in the arms of the One-who-comforts-us-as-a-mother (Isaiah 66:13) occurred in our backyard hammock on a cool, fall night in 1977, over a decade after I first heard Isaiah's words used as a benediction. Serving on the staff at Idlewild Presbyterian Church in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1964-65, I heard the pastor, Dr. Paul Tudor Jones, frequently close the morning worship with:

And now may the love of God, our Heavenly Father,
the grace of Jesus Christ, our Elder Brother,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,
who comfortest us as one whom his mother comforteth,
be with you in your going out and your coming in
till you reach your Father's house to go no more out.

This was well before the feminist interest in reclaiming the historical and biblical images of God as female. The 1964 General Assembly (PCUS) had just approved women's ordination, an idea which I, at twenty-one, had never even

considered! That same June, 1964, I graduated from Southwestern-at-Memphis with a B.A. in Christian Education and accepted a one year position on the Idlewild staff. The prospect of "being allowed" to attend seminary was thrilling! I had considered medical school, with no sense that my sex would prevent my serving as a doctor. The uncertainty I felt about serving as a pastor came not from evaluating my aptitudes and skills, but from realizing the Church's lack of readiness to have a woman as the preacher.

In the small, vital congregation in Homer, Louisiana, where I was nurtured, I had never seen a woman take up the offering or pass out the bulletins, much less preach or baptize a baby or serve on the session. Although you can be sure I observed the work of the church carried out by strong, capable women: teaching, visiting the sick, interpreting world missions, inviting Stillman students to speak. I experienced church life maintained by women in Christ, just no official leadership.

Dr. Jones' benediction, Sunday after Sunday, released something in me. I *knew* what it was like to be comforted by a mother. I *knew* what it was like to give comfort (Latin: with strength) as a "second mother"/big sister to younger brothers and sisters. To think of God as Presence-who-comforts-as-a-mother was empowering to a twenty-one-year-old young woman in her first job and on her way to being one of the first class of women in the B.D. program in PCUS seminaries.

I had seen women in Christ all my life. It was the Word of scripture heard repeatedly in that benediction, expanding my image of God as Father and Elder Brother, naming my experience of God God-who-comforts-as-a-mother, which led me to write in my journal Maundy Thursday, 1965: "Yesterday, I was willing to be a preacher if necessary — tonight I realized I almost hope that's what He* wants me to do."

The male-only language had blocked my consciousness of what was there all the time. Now that Christian feminists — those men and women who share a commitment to human sexual equality and who believe that mutuality is the relational order exemplified by Jesus and specified by the New Testament — are recovering for us the rich diversity of Biblical feminine images of God,¹ I find others are experiencing healing and release comparable to what that benediction did for me over twenty years ago.

What was released was the barrier. The fact that what we feel is release indicates something was blocked — a barrier removed — a stone rolled away. Feminist scholarship, uncovering what was always there, is right in line with the Reformers, recovery of the sovereignty of God and justification by faith. The results are as Peter described on Pentecost quoting the prophet Joel: ". . . God says: 'I will pour out upon everyone a portion of my spirit; and your sons and daughters shall prophesy;'" (Acts 2:17 NEB). Inclusive language is just that — including that which is beyond our awareness — giving us the whole. Inclusive language removes the blockage and allows a continuing *outpouring* of God's Spirit.

Listen for the blocks and for the release. In Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, one sister writes to another: "When I found out I thought God was white, and a man, I lost interest." In the September/October, 1986, issue of

Daughters of Sarah, a journal of Christian feminists, an Indiana woman writes to the editors: "I have been helped beyond anything I ever imagined by the articles (in your magazine). I was ready to give up on God altogether as merely an invention of men to keep women in subordination I now feel . . . closer to (God) than ever before."²

My colleague, the Rev. Jann Clanton, ordained as a Southern Baptist minister in November, 1985, and serving as assistant pastor in a United Methodist Church until her denomination is freed enough to accept her service, says:

Using the feminine images of God in praying has helped me put value on my mothering and on what my mother did for me. Her nurturing was the availability of God who hears the cries of the people.

As a college English professor, I somehow sensed it was "unprofessional" to talk about mothering. After a semester of being the only woman in Clinical Pastoral Education, I was asked why I never talked about my children. None of the men had ever talked about their children! I felt it would have been used against me.

Now I feel good about being a mother. It's O.K. to be a mother and to care about children, because God is a nurturing Mother. I don't have to deny my femininity. I don't have to imitate men to be powerful, to represent God. I'm giving something unique. I now feel confident in being myself as a minister. In seminary, struggling with the call to preach, juggling my roles of seminary student, wife, mother, and college English professor, plus commuting 100 miles each way, I kept asking: am I really supposed to be doing this or is this just an ego trip?

Driving back and forth at night, I would cry and pray. The first time I prayed "Our Mother," it was partly out of curiosity — would I be struck dead?! But something in me was released: an affirmation of myself and of God. I experienced a sense of being held, of being carried.

Praying to God the Mother as I drove that 100 miles home at night was also a catharsis for my anger. In seminary, it was hard for me to live with the sexist language and the posture of the students. The professors were intellectually supportive, but I needed them to *do* more. I saw myself approaching graduation, knowing that the worst male student had a better chance of getting to be pastor of a church than I did. Praying to God the Mother was a catharsis for my anger. I felt God the Mother was on my side and just as incensed as I!!!

Dianne Tennis has done us all a favor in *Is God the Only Reliable Father?* (Westminster, 1985) by seeing the image of God, the Father, as a valuable model for men and a call to accountability for earthly fathers. I agree completely that we need to not abandon God the Father.

It is a *carelessness* in talking about God as male that I wish to challenge. The kind of carelessness that led the little girl in *A Child's Letters to God* to write: "Dear God: Are boys really better than girls? I know you are one, but please be fair!" If an eight-year-old child already perceives the created order and God as unfair, how can she grow up to see doing justice as one of God's

first requirements? Dr. Rachel Henderlite was fond of saying: "The first rule of Christian education is 'Don't teach a child anything you have to un-teach later.'"

While I remember no discussion of feminine images of God in the mid-1960's, at Austin Presbyterian Seminary I did have the privilege of studying with Dr. Rachel Henderlite, the first woman ordained in the PCUS. To see her gently, patiently, tenaciously probing, calling forth a stubborn, obnoxious, defiant student, whom I would have quickly dismissed as impossible, was to see and believe something about the nature of God. She was the first person I knew who was 1) a woman, and 2) committed to using her mind and gentle strength to serve God through the Church. Knowing Rachel has been like sunshine and rain for the me-ness of me to bloom.

I experienced the image of God in Rachel, a woman, and was personally affirmed as a woman. But I was so out of touch with the implications of "male and female in the image of God" as a life-giving truth that when seminars and lectures on "created in the image of God" first started appearing several years ago, my first reaction was: What's so important about that? Why dig that up?

Not until December, 1982, studying Walter Bruggemann's exciting *Genesis* commentary, did the powerful implications of this hit home to me. In a talk at the Presbyterian Woman's Christmas Coffee that year I asked: What does it mean to be women made in the image of God in the 1980's? and suggested answers from Bruggemann's comments on Genesis 1:26-29:

1. The statement about the image of God must be understood in juxtaposition to Israel's resistance to any image of God (cf. Ex. 20:4 and Deut. 5:8). During the exile (the time of our text), Israel resisted every effort to image God . . . Israel was at pains to affirm the otherness and transcendence of God . . . Within that critique of every religious temptation to idolatry, Genesis 1:26-27 makes a surprising counter-assertion. There is *one way in which God is imaged in the world and only one*: humanness! This is the only creature, the only part of creation, which discloses to us something about the reality of God . . . God is not imaged in anything fixed but in the freedom of human persons to be *faithful and gracious*.
2. The image of God is a mandate of *power and responsibility*. . . . Male and female are given "dominion" over the rest of creation The image of "dominion" is the image of the *shepherd* who cares for, tends, and feeds the animals. Politically, it is the Ezekiel 34 image of the shepherd king who is involved, not in exploitation and abuse, but in *securing the well-being of every other creature and bringing the promise of each to fruition*.³

This is a revolutionary text. Look at the inverted view of the relation of Creator and creation. The Creator is the "one who cares in costly ways for the world . . . one who rules by gracious self-giving." The creature is one who is "entrusted with power and authority to rule Man and woman are not the chattel and servants of God, but the agents of God to whom much is given and from whom much is expected."⁴ To me this has tremendous implications for

empowering women and men to speak up and act for the halt of rampant military spending at the expense of the hungry and homeless.

The fact that the human person is created male and female means at least (a) sexuality is good and (b) sexual identity is part of creation, but not part of the Creator.

3. Sexuality, sexual identity, and sexual function belong *not to God's person* but to *God's will* for creation. Sexuality is ordained by God, but it does not characterize God. It belongs to the goodness God intends for creation.⁵

This is critical for the way we talk about God and the way we think about ourselves. Our womanness is part of God's design. Our sexual feelings, our functioning as sexual beings is part of the goodness God intends for creation. The living God, on the other hand, is neither male nor female.

4. The idea of the image of God in Genesis 1:26-29 and in the person of Jesus of Nazareth is an explicit call to form a new kind of human community in which the members, after the manner of the gracious God are *attentive in calling each other to full being in fellowship*.⁶

Realizing I had somehow rationalized being a woman as a reason for "not-being" rather than as a call, like any of my brothers, to accept my own accountability to God, and to God alone, for living out the person-in-community God has created me to be, I wrote:

God laughs at "can't,"
throws back his* head
and guffaws!

Moses demurred: "I can't talk to Pharoah!"
God laughed:
"Who do you think
made your mouth?"

"I am" empowers you.
You can! Your brother Aaron's there.
Go forth! You can!

To anyone's: "I can't do that
I'm a woman. . . ."
God chuckles: "Woman!"

Who do you think
made you woman?

Your sister Miriam
led my people singing
across the Red Sea.

Your sister Mary
dandled the Word Incarnate
on her knee.

Another sister Mary
the first to see
the Risen Christ
and ran to tell the men.
A woman!!!!
Bless your soul!
That's exactly who I intended you to be!
Get up! Join your sisters and brothers!
Go forth!
You can!

God laughs at "can't"
throws back his* head
and guffaws!

I made you
woman,
you can!

A therapist for a group of mothers whose husbands had sexually abused their children, found that whenever the group got into God-issues it was like "running into a brick wall." The therapist asked my colleague, the Rev. Terre Garner, to work with these women. She says of their experience:

The group was theologically more conservative than I and had a backlog of fundamentalist language and theology making it hard to talk about God as anything but Father — that kind of literalism is hard to change. In our sessions together, however, even though they used masculine language about God, I didn't. As we began to deal with their anger and talk about the forgiveness that is possible after processing the anger, I became highly conscious that everyone was saying: "God/He" and "my husband/he." It became clear to me they were swapping out stuff and blaming God for allowing it to happen and that the blaming was being *reinforced* by the language. It was hard to tell when "he" referred to God and when "he" referred to their husbands.

It didn't seem to me they were ready to deal with language about God as a separate issue, so I began to talk about God, using some feminine images, but mostly talking about God in a spiritual way and moving away from God/He. They began to respond!

As I talked about God's care and God's response to us and to our children and God's response to the husbands who had violated their trust, I began to see a real release.

One woman said: "I feel guilty because I want to forgive him." Then she began to talk about her own mother and the kind of loving, caring, protective qualities she had experienced from her. Talking about God in ways other than "He" enabled these folks to get beyond their own negative experience of fathers, to get beyond a male image of God rooted in their history and steeped in their theology. They were able to *experience* a new avenue of relating to God!

Did you see it: the block — the release — the outpouring of God's Spirit!

I want to encourage strongly the intentional use of Biblical feminine images of God in pastoral prayer and liturgy in order to continue to free men and women, boys and girls for mutually loving relationships in God's commonwealth of love. I believe we are most open to an awareness of God's presence in times of corporate prayer. Those of us who exercise the privilege of leading people in public prayer have a tremendous opportunity and responsibility to be faithful to the living God who is experienced in both masculine and feminine ways and who is neither male nor female.

For several years now Presbyterian Women's Bible studies have led women to explore the biblical images of God. Reading and discussing books like Mollenkott's *The Divine Feminine* and Tennis' *Is God the Only Reliable Father?* can help. But I believe it is time to bring the truth into the sanctuary!

Life-changing truths are absorbed more deeply as we talk *with* God than when we talk *about* God. In corporate worship in corporate prayer we are open in a unique way to be conscious of ourselves in the Presence of God. If in those times of heightened awareness, we are led to recognize the Presence of the Self-Revealing God, experienced as female, we'll find energy released to address some of the pressing needs of our time.

Whereas many religious leaders lament their inability to do more to alleviate world hunger, the nuclear threat, and other economic and racial inequities, *their own language is something they could control almost immediately.* By recognizing the female presence in their grammatical choices, and by utilizing biblical references to God as female, they could demonstrate the sincerity of their commitment to human justice, peace, and love, and therefore to psychological and social health.⁷

And so where to begin? The simplest place is to start substituting God when you come to "He" or "His" in hymns or reading scripture. It doesn't matter whether the rest of the congregation is singing "He." At this point you are practicing. I think you'll be as amazed as I was at how much more powerful and true it feels to say: "God is good!" instead of "He is good!" Printing the words to inclusive language hymns in the bulletins helps. At Riverside Church in New York City, following the listing of a hymn such as "Good Christian Men, Rejoice!" there was printed: "Those who prefer inclusive language may use "folks" for "men" and "Christ(s)" for "he" and "his" and "all are blessed" for "man is blessed." Very simple, yet respectful of both those who are expanding their awareness and those who prefer traditional language.

To help people become more aware of the analogical character of all our language for God, I prefer to restructure prayers and other liturgical formulations as similes rather than as metaphors. Instead of "O Mother, we pray for Your presence . . ." try: "O God, who cares for us like a mother hovering over her young, we pray for Your presence"

We can also take advantage of the many non-sexual images of God — Light, Rock, Bread of Life, Water, Creator, Liberator, Advocate, Source, Guide. For Kingdom of God substitute Realm of God or Reign of God or Sphere of God's Love. To ears raw from male-only language, non-sexist

language is always a relief — a balm.

Sharon and Thomas Neufer Emswiler in their invaluable little book *Women and Worship, A Guide to Nonsexist Hymns, Prayers, and Liturgies*⁸ have a rich collection of calls to worship, prayers of confession, words of assurance, offertory prayers, litanies, and benedictions which my pastor/husband (who only had twenty-five “He’s” and “His’s” in last Sunday’s sermon!) has found quite usable. Their book contains a bibliography of other hymnals and collections of liturgical resources as well as an excellent discussion of why these changes are needed. The chapter on “How to Handle Objections to Changes in Your Service” or “How to Introduce Changes in Such a Way That Objections Never Materialize” would make an excellent study for a Worship Committee. My favorite inclusive language hymn writer is Jane Parker Huber. The foreword to her *Joy in Singing*⁹ has an excellent, simple rationale for inclusive language in worship.

I encourage you to explore in your own prayer life and in writing pastoral prayers the rich variety of biblical feminine images. In *The Divine Feminine* Mollenkott includes a full discussion of each of the major biblical images as well as those in church history. The following pastoral prayer uses several of these:

O Lord, our God, how majestic is Your name in all the earth!
How many ways You have given us to show forth Your praise!
Music, organs, voices, work well done, warm hugs, forgiving acts,
a pot of chicken soup — a multitude of ways to express Your
loving-kindness for us and all Your people. We thank You!

Like a mother eagle, You have lifted us up this week.
You have borne us on Your strong wings;
You have carried us when we could not carry ourselves,
yet You would not leave us completely dependent.
You have given us power:

to *stand up* for what is right,
to *speak up* for what is good,
to *act* for justice
in our places of work,
in our homes,
in Your church,
wherever evil threatens to undo us.

You have given us power
to be strong men, powerful women,
courageous girls and brave boys!

We thank You for entrusting us with the care of this beautiful earth!

We come to You in our frustrations and in our anxieties,
for many times we feel overwhelmed by all that we see to do.
In Your love our souls are quieted as a child is quieted
at her mother’s breast.

You provide for us our daily needs as loving fathers or mothers
provide food and clothes for their children.

We count on You to be there when we need You.
 We feel warm and safe when we think of Your loving-kindness
 toward us and all people,
 but we forget the other side of Your love.
 We don't like to think of Your wrath,
 yet we *know* — if we are honest —
 that You love us too much to be indifferent,
 You love us too much to ignore injustice,
 You are as furious as a mother-bear-robbed-of-her-cubs
 when we forget all You have done for us
 and go ungratefully on our way,
 ignoring the needs of people
 in this town and throughout the world
 who need our help.
 Let the roar of your anger
 linger in our ears!
 Let us fear only Your fury,
 as we seek to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly
 and gratefully with You, trusting Your promise to be with us
 as You were with Your son Jesus, who taught us to pray:
 Our Father . . .

Equally valuable will be including references to the way Jesus modeled mutuality in the ways he related to women in a patriarchal society.¹⁰ Last spring I was invited to preach on "The Liberated Woman" at the annual Ladies' Day of the East Waco Cumberland Presbyterian Church. As is the custom in many black churches, the host pastor offered "Comments" after my sermon: "I found myself arguing with each thing Mrs. Holland said. But then in the very next sentence she'd point to what Jesus did and I couldn't argue with that. I'm going to have to make some changes in the ways I treat my wife!"

As a follower of Jesus, when the preacher's cultural habits were shown to be the opposite of the way Jesus acted, he was open to change. Not really knowing the congregation well, I had not presumed to address the implications of women being made in the image of God for male-dominated family life. But the Spirit took care of that. And the men and boys present heard from their own male pastor that some changes were called for in the way men treat women in the family!

I encourage you also to use examples from your own experience as a woman. If you are a man, talk to women who trust you and use examples from their experiences of forgiveness, atonement, grace, etc. For an assurance of pardon I have used:

If a dirty diaper
 can be washed clean enough
 to wipe my own baby's mouth,
 can you not believe you are forgiven?
 In the name of Jesus Christ,
 believe the good news and live!

Join me in giving thanks to our Self-Revealing Nurturing God — the One who created us male and female, the One who poured fresh energy into the world at Pentecost — the One who reformed the Church through men and women recovering the “sovereignty of God” and “salvation by grace through faith.” Through Christian feminists today, men and women, this same living God invites us as pastors to *intentionally recover* the ways people have recorded in the Bible and church history their experiences of God-the-nursing-mother, God-our Ezer/helper, God-the-mother-bear-robbed-of-her-cubs. Care enough to make the effort, to listen to yourself, to edit your prayers and liturgy. It’s not easy to change ingrained patterns, I know. But *we do have control over our own language*. What is at stake is our relationships to ourselves, to each other, and to God. It’s worth the effort.

I want our daughters and sons, as well as the sons and daughters of any congregation we serve, to be so familiar with these images, to have spent so much time in the Presence of the One-who-comforts-as-a-mother, that they can believe:

we are immensely loved,
sufficiently cared for,
and therefore free
to respect/serve/love one another
and live!

NOTES

*In 1965, I was quite comfortable thinking of God only as “He.”

¹. See especially Virginia Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine, The Biblical Imagery of God as Female* (Crossroad, 1984).

². *Daughters of Sarah*, vol. 12 (Sept./Oct. 1986), p. 28.

³. Walter Bruggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), p. 32.

⁴. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁵. *Ibid.*

⁶. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁷. Mollenkott, *op. cit.* p. 14.

⁸. Sharon & Thomas Neuffer Emswiler, *Women & Worship, A Guide to Nonsexist Hymns, Prayers, & Liturgies* (Harper & Row, 1974, revised & expanded 1984).

⁹. Jane Parker Huber, *Joy in Singing* (The Joint Office of Worship, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 1983).

¹⁰. Dianne Tennis, *Is God the Only Reliable Father?* (Westminster, 1985). For an excellent discussion of Jesus as model for men and model-breaker for women, see chapter 5. If you haven’t read this book, order it! It’ll be the best investment you can make for yourself and your congregation!