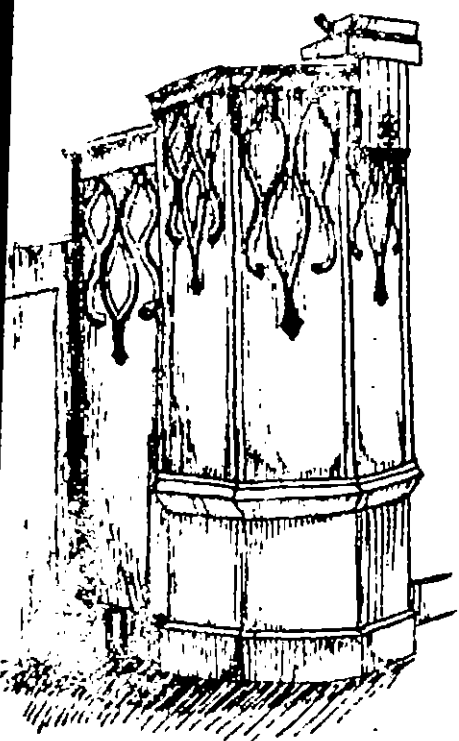


# The Southminster Pulpit

"THE MOTHERHOOD OF GOD"



Text:

"As one whom his mother  
comforts, so I will com-  
fort you. . . ."

Isaiah 66:13

May 11, 1980

Mother's Day

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I offer you an unusual topic for Mother's Day - even if it sounds familiar at the start - on "The Motherhood of God". So that you will know what I have in mind, first let me tell you what I am going to tell you; then I'll tell it to you. I might even circle back, as the old Southern Baptist preacher did, and tell you what I told you later on. . . Whatever, we will explore the question, from the Christian point of view, of the sexuality of God - not in a way that is likely to excite, alarm or offend the most of us, but to ask about the masculine and feminine dimension of the Divine and what benefits or the opposite derive from the common assumption that God is masculine and, further, our universal usage of the masculine gender in our language referring to God. My purpose is not to exhaust the topic, neither to entice any of you to a change of heart or practice, but to introduce it as a serious topic for our corporate consideration as the Church of Jesus Christ in the late Twentieth Century.

Many in our company will not be pre-disposed to take the subject seriously. Some snicker at the language concerns of the feminists, and dismiss them entirely because of the extravagance of some. Others among us are so accustomed to the ancient and honorable biblical language that any mention of God as "she" or "mother" will be impossible to bear - And anger replaces the snickers. Still others will accuse the pastor of the ancient homiletical ploy of answering questions which no one is asking, concluding that we have enough to worry over without worrying over this. They will not be pleased. So be it. . . To make it clear, we need to say four things about the subject.

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1. Beginning with the earliest pages of the Old Testament on throughout the New, through the apostolic fathers, the Middle Ages, the Reformers and most of the Twentieth Century, our references to God the Creator in private devotion, public worship and academic theology are almost exclusively masculine. God is always He. That is rather obvious. And while no serious theologian believes or teaches that God is a man in the physical sense of the word, the ancient assumption of the kind of elevated old man with a beard permeates our attitude and action. Phyllis Beard, one of the more avid feminists in theology, writes:

"The Old Testament is a collection of writings by males from a society dominated by men. These writings portray a man's world. They speak of events and activities engaged in primarily and exclusively by males (war, culture and government) and of a jealously singular God, who is described and addressed in terms normally used for males."

And the Almighty God, Creator God, who refers to self only as "I am that I am" - I am that I am - with no further elaboration, is referred to as Lord and King and Judge and Master and Father of us all. That is not bad or wrong, to be sure, but we simply note that all of the references are masculine in the Bible. While God is essentially indescribable, the assumption of those who lived in a patriarchal society was that he surely had to be a kind of vaunted elevated caretaking powerful man. Even at its zenith in the concept of Everlasting Father, which is the most meaningful definition of the Creator in all the Scripture, still it carries - the feminist complains - a masculine connotation. Why not Everlasting Mother?

Now I admit that is not the kind of thing which bothers most of the people in our churches, as maybe

it should not. But it does bother some, sensitive and thoughtful. I think in our concern for the feminist theologian, if nothing else, it should concern us too. The masculine references are universal - in the Judeo-Christian tradition anyway.

The question of course then becomes "Why?" - If God is not a human man, then why do the references become absolutely masculine? If you drop back to the time of the earliest nomads, to a concept of religion as a God who earned his people's devotion as a grand defender and warrior: powerful and mighty, strong enough to match the unpredictable power of the elements, or the overpowering presence of the enemy across the battle line; a world where strength and power was mandatory for their very survival and where might not only made right but made most other things as well; when the rugged, strong and individualistic male who forged out, gathering food and pitching tents against the wind and marching on with sword drawn; when the God they needed had to have the power to control events and protect his people - Of course, it was natural to speak of him as Mighty God with his strong hand, a superman of a God.

Now think about it for a minute with me: What does God look like to you? I do not mean his presence in Jesus Christ His Son our Lord, but the first person of the Trinity, the everlasting Creator God. No one has seen the Father, the Bible says. . . only the Son has seen him. He also is Spirit, and those who worship him must worship him in Spirit and in truth. . . . My youngest daughter Courtney said to me the other night when I asked her, "What does God look like?", "He doesn't look like anything. He made up his own looks." This matter of image is important, for it projects the kind of God we think is there. And the feminist liberation theologians, like Elizabeth Achtemeier, Mary Daly, Rosemary

Radforth Ruther, Ruth Tiffany Barnhouse, and even Urban Holmes, note time and again how our understanding of ourselves and our world is related to our understanding of the sexuality of God. The first thing we note is the unanimous reference in the Judeo-Christian Biblical tradition of an exclusively masculine God.

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2. Secondly, we go on to agree with the feminist argument that the feminine dimension of the Divine was repressed intentionally at the start and through the centuries, consciously for the most part but in the subconscious of the church as well. In the scriptures and during the early centuries of the faith, to say nothing of modern times, there was and is the obvious alternative. First, in the Bible, the feminine aspect of God's dealing with his people occasionally creeps in. It is often just in passing, to be sure, but there are notable examples, like in Proverbs, the ninth chapter where God is She, the feminine Sophia, the God or should we say Goddess of Wisdom. In the first chapter of Isaiah, the second verse, the feminine characteristic of God is there in the prophets in the description of the Divine person. The Psalmist at one time says, "Have mercy upon me, O God. . .", on account of the multitude of thy motherly compassion. Maybe there was a female Psalm writer after all.

The whole feminine personification comes back again, nowhere better than in Hosea eleven, where when the Eighth Century prophet is declaring how the Lord God loves his people, it is the mother loving her child. It is the feminine characteristic projected: It is I who taught Ephraim to walk. I took them up in my arms and held them in the bonds of love. . . .

Later on in the New Testament, when Jesus was pleading with the people to return to the Lord: O Jerusalem, he said, how often I longed to gather you children as a hen gathers her brood under her wings. The feminine possibility occasionally is there.

In the earliest years of the Christian Church after the death and resurrection of Christ, beginning in the New Testament canon itself, the overpowering domination of the male continues and extends itself, both in the practice of the church and in the portrayal of God. One of the most interesting ways to get at this portion of the topic is to look at a portion of the material in the Nag Hammadi texts. In Elaine Pagels' new book called The Gnostic Gospels, she tells the story of what was found at Nag Hammadi just after World War II in the open desert. A peasant farmer discovered a large red earthenware jar, and in it were thirteen papyrus books bound in leather which contained a vast amount of material on what the early church believed, the apocryphal gospels of Philip and Thomas being the best-known.

But Elaine Pagels goes further to talk about what these discovered fragments say about the feminine characteristics of God in the First Century A.D. She discusses, for example, the purposeful repression of the feminine, how in some of the earliest fragments, the Holy Trinity for example was referred to as The Father, The Son, and The Mother, a spirit to watch over us in a feminine way after the Son has returned to Heaven. But, Dr. Pagels says, by the Second Century all of the feminine references are gone. And the marvelous insights which pertain to the total God we worship become a partial God. And why? Well, she says, mainly without malice, it followed naturally from St. Paul to his followers, where the traditional Jewish hierarchy of social

subordination of women was unwavering and dominant.

At one point one of the fragments has Peter arguing with the disciples that Jesus could not have appeared to Mary and Martha at the Tomb because he would never have appeared to a woman first. Independent research, however, shows that in the first twenty to thirty years of the church - say from 30 to 50 A.D. - it seems certain that many women had prominent positions as teachers and evangelists and leaders and healers. That was, of course, even before the New Testament letters were written, and before the gospels were recorded as we have them.

Professor Wayne Meeks writes of an early oath where the Christians had to say before they joined the church, "In Christ there is neither male nor female", taking the great Magna Charta of the faith from Galatians. But in a few decades, Pagels says, that aspect was repressed. You know how it reads in Ephesians that a woman should be subject to her husband. In Corinthians it says she should keep silent in the church. In Timothy no woman is ever to teach or have authority in the church. And by the beginning of the Second Century, the Christian Church had joined the male dominated world of the middle class. That in turn became, the feminist says, the norm for our theology and practice from that day to this.

Years ago Paul Tillich used to warn that Protestantism was one-sidedly masculine and needed the feminine dimensions of the Divine. And Carl Jung was delighted with the doctrine of the assumption of the Virgin Mary which took place in recent years, even though he didn't believe it, he said it provided the feminine archetype so necessary, and resurrected in part what had been lost in the repression of the feminine. The elevation of Mary in the centuries of Roman Catholicism, her immaculate

conception, perpetual virginity and eventual assumption into Heaven all pointed in the direction of the need of mankind and womankind to relate to the motherhood of God.

The second point we have tried to sketch is that the feminine dimension of the divine is essential and that it was intentionally repressed in favor of the male-dominated church and theology.

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3. Third, comes the repercussion of that suppression. It is obvious by now but we need to say it clearly: This matter of how we refer to God helps to predetermine the way in which we refer to and treat each other, and the subjugation of women, however you appraise it, the feminist theologian says, is a direct result of what we believe and say about who God is and how he/she relates to the people of the earth. And we go up the ladder of the controversial.

There are two passages in Genesis which talk about Creation, and it is important which one you emphasize, to determine the role of women in the world. In the J Document in Genesis 2, Adam the man was lonely, so God caused a deep sleep to fall over Adam, and God took out one of his ribs and from that woman was made. Theologian Mary Daly says that if you start believing the literal meaning of that creation, you automatically make the woman inferior - her job is to take care of her man; she belongs to him and has no existence outside of the rib cage of the man.

But in the P, or Priestly, Document - which is much later - the creation story reads: God said, let us make man in our image, after our likeness, so God created man in the image of God. Male and female he created them - both that is -

in his image. His image contains the attributes of male and female, of father and mother, of prince and princess, of daughter and son. The affirmation and the interaction of both, the feminine and masculine are of equal value; that is the place where our understanding of the sexuality of God begins. And that is where it ends. He is beyond both, above and beyond both male and female. But the Imago Dei, the Image of God contains both. It also contains much more. But it begins in the endorsement of the original authentic quality of male and female. God is best described as he/she or she/he, walking on yonder mountains above the simple questions of the earth, but walking too with his images - male and female he created them.

The problem is that through the centuries the inferior position assigned to women in the church and in the society derives directly from the assumption of the role which the woman was given in creation, as a helpmeet to Adam the man. The repercussions are obvious.

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4. So, lastly, we need to consider a correction in our time, to resurrect the long-forgotten motherhood of God and to relocate within the depth of our culture and in the words of our theology the feminine characteristic of the Divine. We need it now more than ever.

This assumes, of course, that there are feminine characteristics that can be correctly labeled, and so that you will understand fully what I mean we should spend a brief moment on those. There is no exclusive characteristic of male or female; both and each have degrees of the other. Joan Englesman calls it in her book The Feminine and Masculine Configuration, "Masculine," she says, "I take to mean the individual, the proud, the logical, the

practical, the affirmative, the aggressive, the rugged, the strong, the controversial", all of which are no doubt conditioned by and in our culture, but something innate is true as well about them. The feminine configuration, Dr. Englesman says, includes the creative, the intuitive, the mysterious, the beautiful, the loving, the kind, the giving, the caring. And embodied in the history of the species, she says, is a recurring identification of these images and configurations, both of which are essential to the history and development of culture.

So take it to mean the feminine characteristics of the Divine. Do you see the problem now? If it should be true that by emphasizing the maleness of our God, this father/parent image, we have managed to incorporate a theological and social structure which favors the male configuration of ego strength and power and success, as opposed to the female configuration of gentleness and caring, peace and loving kindness; if it is true that our pre-occupation with the violent is fanned and flamed by our pre-occupation with the masculinity of God; if then our need to be right and to prove the others wrong is part of the result, then - this instant - we should reverse ourselves and refer to God as she and mother forevermore. In our time we need those historically feminine virtues which we will call the motherhood of God.

Father's Day is a month away. There are great things that fathers do. Masculine characteristics are important in the world, particularly and essentially in a world of nomadic warring people, but it could be that they crumble and fall when we would think of our society as a place where peace must securely dwell and dwell soon, where gentleness and love are losing, and where our male egos parade around to show each other just how tough we are. Would that it could all dissolve into a new and

shared concern for what we really are and what we can give and do together.

I'm not sure I know enough to say it, but if the way we speak of God is related to that failure to find and honor gentleness and cooperation, then I for one will change it now. If the male parent God is the root of some of our difficulty anyway, a new multiplicity of our images should expand our theology and enhance the possibility that we would finally understand. That did not surprise a friend of mine - a woman friend - who said that such a change might not solve all the problems of the earth but then just look at what the male dominated group has done to the world around us - just look - women could surely do no worse. . . .

And, as Urban Holmes was writing in his marvelous book on the sexuality of God, liberation theology is asking only for a reduction of the hyper-masculine god, not its elimination. It should all not be thought of as a contemporary fad among a few extremists, but a radical concern for all of us. The fatherhood of God was needed to express the loving concern of one who could take care of us. What we really need to do is to find a way to say that God is neither man nor woman, father or mother, both and all and yet beyond, not so much to say that God is "she", but via negativa he is not "he" or at least he/she is not he alone.

One of the most beautiful healings of all is in Luke 13. Jesus was teaching on the Sabbath and a woman who had a spirit of infirmity for eighteen years was bent over and could not fully straighten herself, it says. When Jesus saw her, he said, "Woman, you are freed from your infirmity." And he laid his hands upon her and immediately she stood straight up and praised the Lord. When the hand of Christ is on you, whoever you might be, bent over and crooked as you were, in body mind or soul -

male or female, but in this case woman - the power of Christ allowed her to stand on her own two feet, free and new and whole and equal - A helpmeet for man, but man a helpmeet for her.

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So to women listening and to mothers especially who have embodied the traits and talents that we celebrate, on this Mother's Day we honor in the name of Christ all that you are and do. It is seventy-two years now since the first Mother's Day was celebrated in this nation down in Grafton, West Virginia, in the Andrews Methodist Episcopal Church, which Cecil and Mary Hale tell me is now a National Shrine to Mother's Day. Anna Reeves Jarvis singlehandedly pursued the idea in memory of her mother. In all the ensuing time, you know, even where it has become - as America has such a tendency to do what Boorstin calls a "Festival of Consumption", and where the whole thing became a bonanza for candy shops and florists and jewelers and restaurants and even telephone companies - it is alright.

The attributes of God are reflected in what she is and what she does. Her self-giving re-enacts the self-giving of the Lord. Her care and time, the investment of her love, her pride in the success of those whom she loves, her willingness to wait and watch and cheer and hope and pray - well, with this new emphasis today on the motherhood of God, we say that motherhood reflects more nearly the power, presence and peace of God himself than does any other soul or thing save the presence of Jesus Christ.

Our text in Isaiah 66 is a marvelous vision of the goodness of God - beautiful and motherly. All kinds of things go wrong in the world. Earlier verses of the chapter name some of them: the uproar, the arguments, false worship, people playing

games with each other and with God. Many tremble; many are in terror; and the Lord grows weary and angry with it all - His mighty voice rendering recompense to his enemies.

But then, suddenly, Zion is transformed - a new birth takes place, a new city, a new people - and there is no pain at the birth. It is miraculous: "Before her pain came upon her, she was delivered already" - no doubt in contrast to the pain inflicted as punishment on Eve in her childbirth. No one had ever before witnessed such a marvel. And in the newness, while I don't want to make too much of it and overdo it, when the world finally becomes full of joy and love and delight, when the abundance of God's glory finally comes, when pain and hurt and harm and danger and ugliness and hunger and shame are removed from the world, when one salient image is called for to depict the kindness and the power of the Almighty - watch it - God becomes the Mother of us all.

Listen to the words in Isaiah 66:

All of you who used to be in fear and mourning, afraid of the big bad ugly old world - now, verse 11 - You may snuggle up and nurse at her breasts and be satisfied with her consoling love. You may drink deeply with delight. . . . You shall be carried upon her hip and dandled upon her knees. You shall be comforted in Jerusalem. You shall see and rejoice, and your aching bones shall flourish like the grass. God becomes the Mother - As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you. As one whom his mother comforts, so I shall comfort you. Now and evermore. Amen.

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