

June 19, 2022

John 17:20-26

²⁰“I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²²The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, ²³I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. ²⁴Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. ²⁵“Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. ²⁶I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”

For over 35 years I have publicly tried to avoid referring to God as “He”; tried to ban using any pronoun for God; and, if I use a pronoun, I try to use “She”. This aversion to the masculinity of God is because imaging God as male reinforces an already male-dominate societal hierarchy. King, Father, He legitimizes men’s authority over women. There is no doubt in my mind that for most of the church’s 2,000-year history men have used the masculinity of God to perpetuate a misogynistic view of women; to perpetuate a male power system.

This Father’s Day it might be time for me to re-examine my strict, perhaps dogmatic, insistence of gender-neutral images for God. God as Father-He can truly be seen in a positive

light. A place to begin to look for a positive God-He, a lesser-known Father image is in today’s Gospel lesson. Jesus is asking God to be open to his followers as God has been open to him. This is how Jesus describes this “openness”: “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us.” “In me and I am in you.” This describes an intimacy in which nothing is hidden; an intimacy that is deeply and closely relational – physically, mentally, and spiritually. This relational intimacy is intimated in Jesus’ referring to God as Father. It is important to note that imaging God as Father comes primarily from Jesus himself.

There are only 10 verses in Hebrew Scriptures that use “Father” as an image for God. Jesus used the term hundreds of times. For Jesus speaking of God as Father represented the intimacy he felt, he experienced between himself and God; an intimacy that was both physical and spiritual; an all-encompassing intimacy.

While Jesus uses father-imagery in reference to God, we should not assume that Jesus means the father-image is an all-encompassing, complete image of who God is. For later in his prayer he says: “Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you.” Having referred to God as Father often in his teaching, it is clear here his descriptor “Father” is not so complete an image that it would allow people to know God.

There is no one image that would allow us to “know” God. Even combining all the images we use to reference God, we would fall short of being able to fully know God. God is known in and through experiences which defy transferable descriptive description. Still, we desire to share with others, to describe to others our experiences of God, which is why we use images. I love some of the more creative images for God:

- a hen – sheltering her young, hidden in her feathers
- fountain – where water is always changing, always new
- a rock – solid, unyielding, inanimate or is it?
- light – look at that and describe it to a blind person

It is when we move into the descriptive human attributes that we begin to anthropomorphize God, to make God human, which has the danger of making God look like us and act like us, legitimizing our actions as God-like. One's certainty their actions are God-like can prove to be deadly for others.

This brings me back full circle to why I insist on inclusive language. I believe a hurtful patriarchal system has found legitimacy and support in Western society in and through a male-dominated church system. That system has been changing, in no small part because women have refused to be left out of the language of the church. God is he and she and more. God is radical Other.

In order to understand that which we can never fully understand we do need a descriptive, as inadequate as it might be, to share with others our experiences of God. The easiest to understand descriptions of God are human attributes. There are human attributes that are masculine attributes, but are not necessarily negative attributes just because they are masculine attributes. Dominion, strength, and protection are often seen as masculine attributes, as well as descriptive of God's relationship to us. If misused, these attributes can be destructive.

Which brings me now, finally, to God, as Father, on this Father's Day Sunday. My avoidance of using the Father image for God, I hope you have heard today, has been based on a desire to change a system that has used the Father image in an abusive way by putting down half the human

race – women. But, as we struggle to understand, to experience, that which “the world does not know”, to know God, then we must seek a lesser-known Father image in our search for knowing God.

God as Father can be something positive, but we must reassess and re-define some masculine traits; traits that are known, but often defined differently, such as

- dominion – will be based on mercy and care
- strength – flows out of gentleness
- protection – will insist on caring for the least among us

The power in describing God as this lesser-known Father has less to do with our relationship to God, as it helps humanity envision what a father is supposed to be like. The quote on the front of the bulletin, adapted from a popular song, states best the importance of sharing this “the lesser-known Father” God with the world: “Lord, I want to be just like you, because my child wants to be just like me.”

While I will still use inclusive language, for the most part, I will now be even more vigilant of my pronoun use and when applicable I will speak of God-Father and God-He. And, despite what might appear to be a dislike of all things masculine, I am very grateful to all the men in my life who have helped me come to know better the “Righteous Father, the world does not know”, to know the lesser-known Father. My father and father-in-law, pictured here today, as well as many other men in my life, helped me be in right relationship with God, my spouse, and my children.

With God, the lesser-known Father, as our example, may each one of us strive, in relationship to others, to live out our dominion, strength, and desire to protect as God has in relationship to us, revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Amen.