“Why Do we Call God ‘The Father’?”

Sermon, June 16, 2019

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Scripture passage Romans 8:14-17

Happy Father’s Day. And, happy Trinity Sunday. Since these two days fall on the same day this Sunday, I’d like to talk about the biggest Father figure of them all, God. For centuries, Christians have called God the Father. Lately, in the last fifty years or so, this has come under question. Feminists and others have asked why does God have to be thought of as male only? Why a Father? Why not something else, a mother perhaps, or just a parent? Does God have to be a father?

The idea that God is a father did not come from the Jews. In the Old Testament, God is occasionally called a father, but it is far less common than being called a king. When God is called a father in the Hebrew scriptures, it is always in reference to being the parent of the people of Israel.[[1]](#footnote-1) The idea that God is the Father of the Universe was a new idea developed by Christians.[[2]](#footnote-2) In the Trinity, we have the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Most of us today assume that God is a father because he has a son, Jesus, and the holy spirit is something that swirls around them and comes to us in times of need. Or something like that. For most people, the trinity is a bit fuzzy, if we give it any thought at all.

The early Christians believed that God existed before the creation of the universe. At some point, God decided to turn an idea in the divine mind into a reality. That reality is the universe we now live in. So, they made a distinction between God’s consciousness and the thoughts which become realities.[[3]](#footnote-3) Meditators know this distinction – when we quiet our mind, we notice thoughts going by. They are part of our mind, but not our entire mind. The early Christian theologians believed that God had a consciousness, and thoughts within that mind. Those thoughts were expressed in the creation of reality – God spoke these ideas, and they became the oceans, the sky, all living things, and then us. God kept sharing these thoughts through the prophets, like Moses and Isaiah, and ultimately, God’s thoughts came to dwell among us in human form as Jesus. That’s how the first theologians and Christians saw God.

It was abstract and deep, and they needed a way to get the idea across to regular people, so they chose metaphors from every day life. [**Picture of Roman family]** Since most Christians weren’t Jews, but Romans and Greeks, they chose images from their everyday lives. A Roman family was composed of a father, a mother, some kids and some people who were enslaved. In Roman times, the father was in charge of everything. He owned the slaves, and he had complete power over his wife and children.[[4]](#footnote-4) Every day was Father’s Day for the Romans. So, if God was in charge of the universe, God would be the father, who could pass down his wisdom and wealth to the world. But who in the world could accept what the father had to give? It wasn’t the enslaved - they were considered untrustworthy since they always wanted to run away - understandable. [[5]](#footnote-5) It wasn’t the wives or daughters, since women were considered physically and mentally inferior to men.[[6]](#footnote-6) That left the sons. They could inherit property, and they were the most likely to understand the will, the mind of the father.

So, in our reading today, Paul uses this kind of family language. He says that when we follow God, we are not like slaves, but like sons to God the Father. We are privy to God’s inheritance of love and spirit. It is a metaphor drawn from Roman family life.

They also used this metaphor to explain Christ’s relationship to God. Christ was understood to be the son of God because of all beings, He understood the mind of God best. If you know Christ, you know the mind of God, because you are in touch with the love and wisdom that comes from God.[[7]](#footnote-7) Early on, Christians used other metaphors to get this message across, too. God was like the sun, the source of all love. We can’t touch the sun, but we can know it through the sun’s rays, which they thought were attached to the sun. They said that God was like a spring, whose water flows out as a river.[[8]](#footnote-8) Taste the water, and you have been in contact with the spring, the source of water. So, fatherhood was not the only way to describe God as the source of all life and love in the universe. It was one image of many to explain the mystery of God’s relationship to our world.

But over time, the idea of God as a father who creates all by himself came to be taken literally. God became male, a father who sent his only son to save the world. People came to imagine God being like a real father. And that became a problem. It made God male. It also made God sound like an abusive parent who deliberately sacrificed his only son on the cross.[[9]](#footnote-9) Christ was no longer part of the mind of God in human form, but a son whose father had sent him to be killed. That image has been harder and harder to accept, so people have turned away from God, the cruel father figure.

For those of us who have stayed in church, we have been trying to come up with other ways to understand God. In the Lord’s prayer, many churches, like this one, refer to God as a mother and father. Others refer to God just as creator, and Christ as a redeemer. We need new ways of speaking about God, so we are trying out new metaphors that speak to us of who God is to a modern people.

This work matters because while we have been drawing away from seeing God as a creator father, the secular world is still under that metaphor’s spell. For the past century or two, our collective fantasy life has become obsessed with father figures who create life without women. God the Father has morphed into men who decide to create artificial life. **Frankenstein** We see this fantasy played out in the movies, the place where our civilization goes to dream. Dr Frankenstein is the first mad scientist who creates artificial life. In **The Lord of the Rings**, it is an evil male wizard who creates the race of Orcs to conquer humanity. In **Star Wars**, it is the evil emperor who creates an army of cloned stormtroopers. In Blade Runner, it is a corporation head who creates a new race of androids. In Westworld, men create androids as play things in an amusement park. In virtually every case, the person who creates these new forms of life is always a single man. A male creator who gets no help from women. A father without a mother who gives birth. *The secular world didn’t get over the idea of God the Father, it was taken over by it.*

These fantasies are how we as a culture daydream. What starts out as a fanciful notion evolves into a way of thinking that shapes reality. Today, we are building real robots and artificial intelligence. Like the mad scientists of science fiction, we are fascinated by the idea of creation, but we have little interest in asking questions about the human impact of these new creations. Uber is at the forefront of the development of automated cars. Uber doesn’t appear to be worried about the impact this will have on taxi drivers, who are often immigrants who desperately need the work. The press is fascinated by the process of creating artificial life and intelligence, but gives little thought to how these technologies will make us feel, how they will affect our lives as real people who are made of fragile flesh and blood. Real parents care about feelings. Real parents nurture their children all through their lives. That kind of parenting is lost in the fascination with simply conceiving new artificial forms of life.

But there is cause for hope. It may seem unlikely, but what all of this proves is that what we do here in church is very important. The secular world has inherited and twisted one of our Christian ideas. It is not ahead of us, but behind us. Now that we have realized that thinking of God as a Father is not the only way, or even the best way, to imagine God, we have an opportunity to come up with different metaphors for how we think of and feel about God.

Metaphors matter. Is God a river, light, a parent, a loving force, or better imagined in some other way? Our Christian ancestors knew that God will always be more than we can express in words, so we need to be poetic and imaginative in how we think about our relationship with God, the source of all things. In church, we get a chance to think about the Ultimate, about our relationship to the Universe. How we are cared for, and can be caring, in this universe and society. What we come up with here, in churches like this one, will spread out and seep into secular society. We have a chance to share our conviction that divine love is real, and it has been given to us to share, for the good of all beings, human and otherwise. It is time to let the world know that Father’s Day is one day, not every day. And that God is not just our Father, but our mother, our spring, our sun, and so much more.

Amen.

1. Alon Goshen-Gottstein , “God The Father In Rabbinic Judaism And Christianity: Transformed Background Or Common Ground? “*Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 38:4, Spring 2001, 475. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Christians believed they were the first to consider God their Father. *Tertullian, Cyprian and Origen on the Lord’s Prayer*, trans Alistair Stewart-Sykes, (St Vladimir’s Seminary Press:New York,2004), 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This idea is present in the prologue of John’s Gospel, it is also contained in a hymn which Paul quotes in his letter to the Phillippians ( 2:6-7). For a fuller theological discussion, see Tertullian’s early 3rd century text, “ In Opposition to Praxeas”, chs 5-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Fathers were in full control of their sons until the father died. Women always had male guardians, and could not be witnesses in court. ( 34) The father of the household owned the slaves, even owned their babies. They could be killed on a whim, with no legal consequences ( 40). The Romans did not trust their slaves, they had a saying: you have as many enemies as you have slaves. (64) Sandra R Joshel, *Slavery in the Roman World.* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The Romans did not trust their slaves, they had a saying: you have as many enemies as you have slaves. Sandra R Joshel, *Slavery in the Roman World,* 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Jean-Baptiste Bonnard, “Male Body and Female Body in Greek Medicine” *Clio: Women, Gender, History* 37 | 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Justin Martyr, “Dialogue of Justin Philosopher and Martyr with Trypho, a Jew.”, 61. This was written around 155-167 CE. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Tertullian’s early 3rd century text, “ In Opposition to Praxeas”, ch 8. Also, Justin Martyr, “Dialogue of Justin Philosopher and Martyr with Trypho, a Jew.”, ch 128. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See John Shelby Spong, *Unbelievable*, (Harper One: San Francisco 2018), 160. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)