

Gendering God is Worth Reflection

January 10, 2023 by Deacon Peggy Hahn

What do we do with our “Father” language that refers to God as our heavenly Dad? What about all the other texts that use male pronouns that refer to God as “he”? How does our “God-language” hurt or serve our intention to welcome all people?

Thanks for asking. These have been frequent questions following my article about welcoming people using gender-inclusive pronouns last month. I’ll admit this is a messy conversation because it pushes hard on our understanding of God. We think of God as unchanging, even as so much is changing around us.

My encouragement to reduce the use of male pronouns for God comes as a surprise to many people. It may even feel like a threat to the whole Christian enterprise. Let me walk you through my own thinking as you reflect on this yourself. My point in writing this is not as a challenge but as an invitation to reflect and ask new questions of our way of being church in order to be intentional rather than on automatic pilot.

The first followers of Jesus were Jewish people.

We know this through our sacred texts as well as other writings of the day. In spite of the local culture, the Gospels and the Epistles included women and children in their audience—although this was not always understood by the power systems over time. These writers were in conflict with much of the first century world in which they lived, a world which offered little or no status to women as full humans. Part of the radicalness, even subversiveness, of Jesus and his disciples was the way they welcomed women and slaves into the inner circle.

These Jewish people worshiped the same God we worship and they understood Jesus to be the long-awaited fulfillment of the scriptures. They were known to be a sect within Judaism and did not set out to start a new religion. The first followers of Jesus were welcomed in the synagogue and often financially supported the synagogue.

Yet they were not “fully in” because they weren’t Jewish. Paul said that in Christ they were fully in and did not need to become Jewish. In fact, he held that Gentiles coming to the God of the Jews was a sign that Jesus was the Messiah and that Christ was returning soon and ushering in the reign of YHWH. If the Gentiles coming is a sign, why make Jews of them? In fact, when the Apostle Paul was evangelizing people to follow Jesus, the Messiah, the

anointed one, he most often went to the synagogues and to the God-fearers. These were the people who worshiped YHWH but were not fully welcomed into the synagogues because they were seen as unclean.

So, a question for our reflection is, what do we think that people “have to become” in order to be included in our congregation? Our homes?

Think about the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8 who was on his way home from Jerusalem (where the synagogue was) when Phillip encountered this person reading the scriptures. The Ethiopian Eunuch was kept outside of the court of the men in the temple not because he was Ethiopian, but because he had been separated from his gender in order to be of service as a court official. The Ethiopian Eunuch could not be identified as a man nor as a woman because the Eunuch’s identity would have been unique within their culture.

The Hebrew people of Jesus’ day would not have even spoken the name of God out loud, so no pronouns were needed! After the Babylonian Exile (6th century BCE), the Jews stopped using the name Yahweh as they found it too sacred to even speak. It was replaced vocally in the synagogue by the word Adonai (My Lord) and later translated into Kyrios (Lord) in the Greek version of the Hebrew scriptures.

Later, they used of "lord" with regard to Jesus with political overtones we often miss. Lord was an honorific title in the Roman empire. The Roman household/house was the "domus." The master/ruler of the household was the "dominus."

When the early followers of Jesus called Jesus "lord" they are saying that in their alternative household/family of faith (hence all the brother/sister language) the lord/master of the household is Jesus. And Jesus runs the household quite differently from the lords of the empire. (From the Latin Mass. "Dominus vobiscum." "The Lord be with you.")

The second question for our reflection is, how will our households of faith (congregations) be different from - an alternative to - the households of the world?

Fast forward to early translations of these sacred texts, the predecessors of the Bible we know today. We can thank Martin Luther for his work translating the entire Bible into German over 500 years ago. Luther chose this great undertaking to allow ordinary people access to the scripture, without interpretations made by the priests of his day. The peasants he was writing to were often illiterate and living in a patriarchal society. He used their language to communicate the grace of God. Luther used male pronouns. Even so, I am mindful of a few surprises in scripture. For example, Genesis 1:26a says:

"Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image...' The use of the plural "us" is usually understood to refer to the heavenly hosts – the expressions of God. Some might even say, The Holy Trinity. Most congregations are not focused on this conversation, but nonbinary people find peace in the understanding that God can be understood as plural.

As we consider our own lens, at a time in which the world is rapidly changing and many denominations are open and affirming of nonbinary gender expressions, we can ask, "What purpose is fulfilled by continuing to consider God as masculine?" God is so much more than our hearts

and minds can grasp. The most faithful leaders among us would acknowledge the greatness of God in relationship to humankind. Why would we reduce this greatness to one expression, if we are all made in God's image?

So, what do we do with "Our Father?"

In the first century, "Our Father in heaven" was a subversive beginning pointing to Augustus. Notice the coin on the right, "Son of God. Father of the Country." If you know the context and the subtext, dropping "father" might rob the prayer of it's subversive punch. Yet much of this is not understood, lost in our context as we articulate the "Our Father by rote memory. And at the same time it is a barrier for those who hear this as a gendering of God.



Tradition is designed to preserve the culture of the past without recalling the full meaning in the original context. The day will come when a variety of interpretations of this prayer are offered. *The Inclusive Bible* takes a stab at this by offering:

"This is how you are to pray: Abba God in heaven, hallowed be your name! May your reign come; may your will be done on earth as it is in heaven: give us today the bread of Tomorrow. And forgive us our debts, as we hereby forgive those who are indebted to us. Don't put us to the test, but free us from evil."
Matthew 6:9-13

Something is lost, and something is gained. Until we have an agreed upon version of this prayer, that either puts it in historical context or uses fully inclusive use of language, we are left with a choice of leaning to the ancient past or the present future.

A third reflection question is do you lean towards teaching the historic subversive use of "Our Father" or some type of inclusive language for our

current context, or are you somewhere in between? How does your answer to this question invite people into the love of God?

Why rock this boat?

The church is in steady decline. People are hungry for God. The number of people experiencing mental health crises, especially elders, youth, and children, has never been higher in this country. The search for spirituality is across the generations, ethnic groups, cultures, abilities, socio-economic diversities, gender and sexual expressions. Research is clear about the benefits from being part of a faith community, yet people are reluctant. Many reading this are part of an open and affirming expression of the Christian movement. (The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Episcopal Church, etc.) Let this soak in. People want, even need, to be part of a loving, grace-filled community. Will they find this in our congregations?

I have been asked, what does this mean for our cisgender males? Even females? Some people yearn for a loving father and the language of Father God offers comfort and protection. Others are triggered by male language due to the trauma in their lives. It is messy at best.

I have two competing thoughts here: First, I am referring to how we talk about God and pray to God publicly. Our private prayers always reflect our personal relationship with God.

Second, our relationship with God is never completely personal. We are part of a global, timeless movement of people yearning for God. Opening up our language is an evangelical witness to God's love for all people.

Yet, when we change language and share power, our identity is in question. We ask ourselves what are WE losing? Changes like this make us uncomfortable and initially defensive. Not every congregation will open their hearts in this way. But we can all be aware of our pronouns. We can all have open conversations about what it means to be welcoming and affirming. We can expand our mindset to imagine decisions being made at church in a 50-50 way: 50% for those who are in the community, 50% for those we are hoping God will bring into our congregation.

Am I asking too much of a weary people? You have to manage that for yourself and your people. Let's not forget that the highest suicide rate in this country is among children and youth who are discovering that the determination of a doctor in their first moments of life does not align with who they and God know them to truly be.

We can start with a more generous understanding of God as non-gendered in most of our references to God. Think of all the names for God we have but seldom use! (Note: There is a long list of inclusive terms for God in the back of the *All Creation Sings* hymnal supplement which all come from Scripture.)

Paying attention to pronouns is a wonderful, affirming way to welcome people who are discovering their own gender expressions. If God is love, we have nothing to lose by taking the broadest interpretation possible so more people can know this love .

Final reflection questions include what are the opportunities you have to engage others in this conversation? How can we overcome our personal resistance to changes like pronouns in public prayer that encourage more people to feel known and loved?

