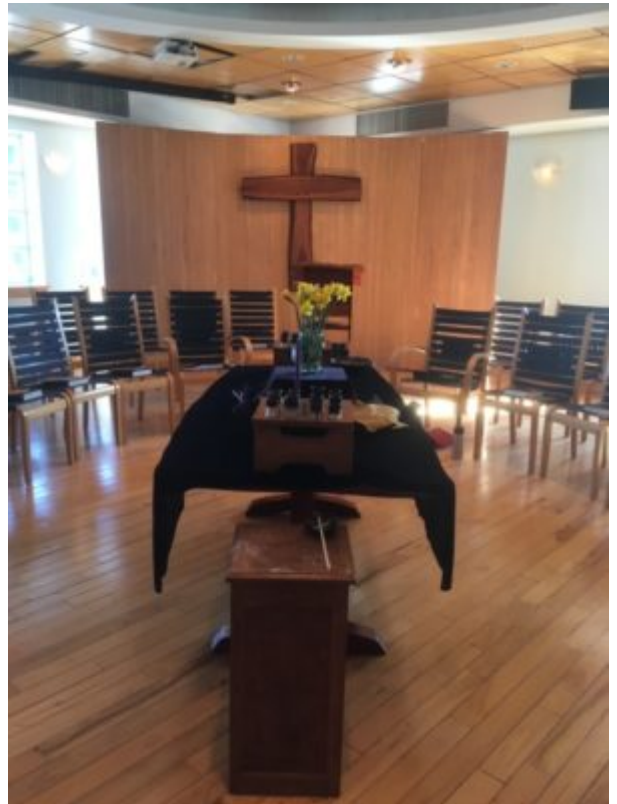


“Naming God” by Pat Conover



March 1, 2020

The First Sunday in Lent

Sandra was scheduled to preach this morning but is not well. I was scheduled to preach next Sunday and Sandra will take that slot. This sermon references the lectionary for next Sunday, particularly the famous John 3:16 scripture.

The first four sermons of March will be given by members of the Eyes to See mission group. The sermons grew out of our shared prayer time and conversations regarding the justice issues involved in naming God with masculine references. We had a mutually supportive conversation with Celebration Circle as part of our process. Our conversations deepened as we put our justice concerns in theological perspectives. We became aware that talking about God with gender references was part of the larger question of whether or not it is helpful to talk

about God as if God is a human person.

Part of awakening my concern to naming God in liturgical language came with playing a very small part in the United Church of Christ Committee that produced the New Century Hymnal. The committee did not want to offend scientists by keeping the flat earth metaphysics of many hymns. God is not at home above the clouds in Heaven. I was well aware of, but not part of, the Committee's five year work to pick hymns, change hymns, and provide more than one language alternatives for some hymns with sensitivity to spiritual and justice concerns about gender.

There are three main ways the hymnal responds to gender concerns. The first was *avoidance*, dropping some hymns that couldn't be fixed. The second is *rewriting* parts of numerous hymns to avoid references to Creator or Spirit in gender terms and to minimize use of the words Lord and King with reference to Jesus as our Christ. The third is balancing masculine and feminine references for people seeing God in themselves and each other, as in the wonderful "Bring Many Names" hymn. We have picked easy to sing hymns so that you can notice how God is named and not named. I feel a certain responsibility to point all this out because the ground breaking approach of this hymnal to gender justice issues was what made me excited enough to buy a lot of them and donate them to Seekers. Thankfully, if there was grumbling about little or no traditional gender language in the hymnal, I didn't hear about it.

I begin with the image that the author of the Gospel of John gives us in verses 7-8 of the third chapter concerning the metaphoric naming of Spirit as wind.

"The wind blows where it will... You do not know where it comes from or where it goes... so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." (RNEB)

Spirit imaged as wind is a chaotic image. Wind is also a prominent chaotic image in Luke's story of the early church gathered at Pentecost. Along with the chaotic images of drunkenness and fire, wind suggests the wildness and emotional intensity of some experiences of Spirit. John the Baptist, who inspired and provided context for Jesus, is depicted as a wild man living in a wilderness area along the Jordan river. John offered Spirit referenced salvation without all the traditions, rules, trappings, and practices of the grand Jerusalem Temple. I begin with images of wildness and chaos to suggest that we *point* to God with names but we *do not define* God with our names.

In all four gospels Jesus point to the importance of *directly and immediately* experiencing Spirit. Knowing referenced to direct experience comes before we conceptualize, symbolize, or name Spirit. Infants know who mama and papa are before they can say the words, because mama and papa matter.

With this guidance, I say to you: "I cannot tell you what Spirit IS, but I can tell you that Spirit matters more than anything else. When you *experience what matters more than anything else* in yourself and in your relationships your emotional reaction will help you *appreciate* what I am talking about. Awe and Alleluia are words that point to our appreciation of Spirit.

Peter Bankson's listing of 127 million Names of God includes a lot of references to diverse aspects of experiencing Spirit such as Agile Enlivening Sustainer of Mercy. These are names of kinds of our experiences of awe and alleluia when we recognize Spirit within us and in our relationships.

Jesus *inspires* us to explore, embody, and express our responses to Spirit in our conversations and actions. The inspiration of Jesus led his early followers to remember him as incarnate Spirit of God. When we embody Spirit as inspired by Jesus we name ourselves as the living body of Christ. We

can point to examples of this in our shared lives, but it is hard to define. Imagine Peter's experiential names of God as flower petals blowing around in a strong wind, making the wind visible as energy.

Progressive Christian naming of God has three referential contexts. I have been discussing Spirit with regard to direct experience. The other two referential contexts are creation and salvation. The most general name of God is Creator and raises questions about what can be known of God all the time and everywhere instead of appreciating God in particular moments.

God known as Creator lifts up the big philosophical issues that come down to what we can know of God by knowing creation, of knowing nature and reality. As metaphor, "What could we know of human beings by considering automobiles?"

"God" is a human constructed name. This general name references the generality of God conceptualized as Creator. In Christian tradition, the name God also points to the unity of knowing God in three ways named as Creator, Spirit, and Savior.

Creator has given us the gift of life as creatures made up of muons in relationships as baryons. We don't experience our lives as baryons in shaped and changing relationships. We don't notice the millions of neutrinos zooming through us every minute. Creator began the universe as a burst of energy and small particles and we are the most complex patterns of relationships of such particles and energy whether you know that or not, whether you care or not. We don't and can't directly experience all of God's creation. We know more than we experience.

We can think of God as Creator, even though we cannot imagine what that logically means other than reasoning that there was potential for the universe before it began about 14 billion

years ago. The reasonableness of thinking of God as Creator is that there is something rather than nothing. We exist on the Earth which exists, in the solar system which exists in the Milky Way galaxy, which exists in the Cosmos. Please notice that I am not arguing for existence as a proof of God. As human beings we do not have standing to prove or disprove God. But it is reasonable to think of God as Creator, more reasonable if you accept the Big Bang theory of the beginning of the universe.

Does it matter to you that the Cosmos is about 14 billion years old rather than, say, 5 billion years? The spiritual challenge of seeing Creator is whether we are thankful for the gift of our lives, our companions, all the wonders of nature. It is easy to be thankful when things are going well. Jesus guide us to thankfulness in the midst of unjust and horrible tragedy. We all face the tragedy that our baryons cannot sustain the relational shapes of life beyond an ever dwindling numbers of years.

As progressive Christians we name Jesus as Christ, meaning the Savior who has inspired us by guiding us to explore, embrace, and embody Spirit. When you read the Christian Testament with an eye to the importance of experiencing Spirit the words jump off the pages because they are confirmed by our own immediate here and now living. Our Christian unity is based on looking to Jesus as Savior, based in following the guidance of Jesus to live in harmony with Spirit in our relationships with each other. This is what we mean when we *name ourselves* as being the living body of Christ. Our knowing of Jesus is about truths communicated as biography, history, and narrative rather than the poetry of immediate experience or the generalizations of philosophy and science. Are we willing to let the inspiration and guidance of Jesus change our lives and relationships?

We name Spirit with poetry, flower petals blowing in the wind that help us see the wind. We name Creator with philosophy,

science, and mathematics concerning what we can know of our lives in the generality of reality. We name Jesus as Savior who focuses for us what God looks like in human form, as inspiration and guidance for becoming saints who make Christ visible to each other. Becoming saints is about our readiness, humility, and courage to risk into the inspiration and guidance of Jesus, to shape ourselves ourselves and our relationships so that we can see Spirit present within us and among us. Can we have eyes to see and ears to hear what matters, what matters more, and what matters most?

Jesus is our common reference for pointing to what Spirit looks like when embodied in the spirituality of human beings. That is why we give Jesus the name Savior. When we name God with reference to Jesus as Savior, as our Christian Christ rather than as a universal Christ, it is appropriate to use names that point to Jesus as a man. Jesus was a man and it is reasonable to presume he was a male.

This leads to my meditation on the famous John 3:16 scripture.

For God so loved human beings that Jesus was born and has told us, and shown us, what it is like to risk into the humility and courage of exploring, embracing, and embodying Spirit. As we make spirit visible to each other and the wider world, as we see spirit in each other, however named, we discover why salvation matters so much.

Jesus showed us that salvation is not defeated by tragic suffering and death if we are willing to grieve with broken hearts when what matters to us is taken away. Jesus was born as a human being and shows us that tragedy cannot keep us from living into harmony with Spirit. Our moments of celebration and grief are opportunities to appreciate what has been lost, to be thankful for what remains. Lost and found, newly born and always aging, we can live into thankfulness for the gift of life, thankful for Christian companions that help us appreciate what matters, thankful that we can be servants in

the wider world whether appreciated or not.