

“The Magnanimity of God” by Sandra Miller



March 8, 2020

The Second Sunday in Lent

Let us pray that the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be of value to you, Holy One, ground of our being who opens the path to our personal and communal salvation. Amen

As you all know, I was unable to preach last Sunday. I would like to offer my public thanks to Pat for exchanging Sundays with me, and for how gracefully Celebration Circle shifted liturgists and roles to accommodate my illness. I had been entrusted by my mission group to offer an introduction to the cycle of 4 distinctly personal reflections by members of Eyes to See, Ears to Hear Peace Prayer Mission Group on the sensitive topic of how we name and understand God, and I would like to convey now some of what I prepared.

Our collective hope is that each of our different perspectives

might illuminate why non-gendered and non-anthropocentric pronouns are worthy of great consideration for each of us, for Seekers, and perhaps, all people. For our mission group, this is not a unanimous understanding, yet it is a matter of faith, and justice. Eyes to See acknowledges the challenge and constancy which Celebration Circle and members of the larger community have worked with this subject over the years. We are unanimous in believing that we are at a point in time that begs us to revisit this changing landscape. We believe that opening this conversation can expand our spirits and our understanding of one another. Furthermore, we believe that how we use language can help prepare our young people to find their place in relation to the God of each of their understandings.

One last preface. I will not be referring to this week's lectionary readings. It would require of me to write 4 midrashim, and that is not my area of expertise, though I am certainly opinionated about the readings, and indeed the totality of the Old and New Testaments.

Many people observe Lent by giving up something meaningful to them, while others, in our more contemporary time, take on a new practice in order to draw closer to God through empathetic action with Jesus' 40 days before the Crucifixion. Isaiah 58:6-8 speaks to me in the way in which fasting and doing are married as a guide to walking with God. These lines also provide guidance for the kind of action to live by I want for myself, and all of you:

*Is not this the sort of fast that pleases me
-it is the Holy One who speaks-
To break unjust fetters
And undo the thongs of the yoke,
To let the oppressed go free,
And break every yoke,
To share your bread with hungry people,
And shelter homeless, poor people,*

*To clothe the one you see to be naked
And not turn from your own kin?*

Allow me to take a deep breath, in which you are free to join me.

I quote from Jayne O'Shields-Hayner, which offers a glimpse into what I hope I am offering today – a way to look at our fickleness, and even our hiding from God, as well as a way to move forward.

“In my life, the Light, or that of God, appears and disappears. It dramatically reveals its presence and then alternately retreats into a shroud. It becomes diffuse and universal, then appears as individual and personal. I receive grace and miracles, and soon I doubt my own experiences. I am a believer, and I am a doubter. Believing, as I do, that truth is a characteristic of God, I must admit to my contradictory and fickle attitudes and experiences. I realize it's likely that my attention and focus may actually be what is appearing and disappearing from the Light, rather than the other way around. What I believe, however, is what I experience. The best I can do to walk in the Light is to remain open, focused, gentle, truthful, and willing to regard my fellow travelers in this life as divine.”
<https://www.friendsjournal.org/naming-god/>

In Genesis we are told that God created the heavens and earth in 7 days, which is a reduction to human terms of what was beyond the scope of human understanding thousands of years ago, and will probably remain true for humanity forever. Yet today, we can turn to many sources, both theological and scientific that can expand our current understanding. Matthew Fox's new creation story, was a big part of my journey back to God, and its beginning, opens up an avenue to the Light, and is a heck of a midrash:

*In the beginning was the gift.
And the gift was with God and the gift was God.
And the gift came and set its tent among us,
first in the form of a fireball
that burned unabated for 750,000 years
and cooked in its immensely hot oven
hadrons and leptons.
These gifts found a modicum of stability,
enough to give birth to the first atomic creatures,
hydrogen and helium.
A billion years of stewing and stirring
and the gifts of hydrogen and helium
birthed galaxies—spinning, whirling, alive galaxies
created trillions of stars,
lights in the heavens and cosmic furnaces
that made more gifts*

...

*Gifts upon gifts, gifts birthing gifts, gifts exploding,
gifts imploding, gifts of light, gifts of darkness.
Cosmic gifts and subatomic gifts.
All drifting and swirling, being born and dying,
In some vast secret of a plan.*

...

This poetic, faithful creation story, grounded in science, goes on to include all life forms as we know them today. You can read the full text is in Fox's book *Creation Spirituality*.

This week I began a many decades long abandoned practice of taking a daily walk, at least almost daily. Being outdoors, beyond the safe boundaries of my private environment is a way for me to walk in the Light of God, and ponder questions about my faith and understanding of my place in a cosmic universe. I do that not so much in concrete terms, as I am not a scholar or great thinker of profound thought. My interaction with the Holy One, that I acknowledge as "I Am that I Am", is entirely experiential. I notice the one Mallard duck in a side pond of

Greenbelt Lake; the abundant number of birds that include my yard as part of their territory; the magic that happens when I make art or am left breathless by another artist's work; and when I have been comforted by my loved ones. It's ethereal and tactile. It's about interaction/experience. My ability to stand in utter awe and praise of the God I know and hold in the center of my heart, is the key to any chance I have to walk as best I can in the footsteps of Jesus, and to stay sane. I desire to be as magnanimous in my embrace of I Am that I Am, as God has been with the entirety of creation.

Building on Isaiah, the O'Shields-Hayner quote, Fox's creation story, and how I just described my reflection process, I will offer another quote. The feminist poet and prophet Adrienne Rich wrote a poem called *Stepping Backward*, about compassion. Here is a relevant stanza:

*You asked me once, and I could give no answer,
How far dare we throw off the daily ruse,
Official treacheries of face and name,
Have out our true identity? I could hazard
An answer now, if you are asking still.
We are a small and lonely human race
Showing no sign of mastering solitude
Out on this stony planet that we farm.
The most that we can do for one another
Is let our blunders and our blind mischances
Argue a certain brusque abrupt compassion.
We might as well be truthful. I should say
They're luckiest who know they are not unique;
But only art or common interchange
Can teach the kindest truth. And even art
Can only hint at what disturbed a Melville
Or calmed a Mahler's frenzy; you and I
Still look from separate windows every morning
Upon the same white daylight in the square.*

(The full poem is in her book *A Change of World*, published in 1951, reissued in 2016)

These bits and pieces capture the in and out, back and forth, light and dark aspects of what I am trying to say. This has not been an easy sermon to write as I am well aware that, given how challenging it is for me to encompass thoughts about how I see God and all of creation, it may well be challenging for you to hear.

My feeling of being called to preach comes from a commitment to grow into my understanding of God's call on my life, which is undeniably affected by the deeply wounded and broken place in me. I am extremely discomfited with references to God as Lord, Father, Mother, He, and/or She, even when both are referenced in the same prayer, hymn, sermon, etc. That is language used to humanize God. For me, it is about more than the balance we try to employ in efforts to be inclusionary, which puts limits on what I understand of God, as I've already said. I am also deeply discomfited by use of the term Lord when speaking of Jesus, and Jesus Christ. The aside here may be heretical, however, while Jesus was chosen and named as the Son of God in his time, I believe that Christians throughout history, and in the here and now, are the resurrection. We call ourselves the Body of Christ, and if all Christians are the Body of Christ we are not an individual he. Furthermore, I believe that I am imbued with no less a divine spirit than Jesus, though it is not God's call on my life to be the individual Jesus in my time.

My extreme discomfort comes from my personal story; a story that includes abandonment and abuse in my family of origin, as well as in relationships with friends and lovers, in faith communities, and in work scenarios. Those experiences have been perpetrated by a few women, and unfortunately, mostly by men. You can imagine that trying to see, understand, or name God with a term that has often been associated with what should have been a nurturing presence, is a hurdle I am

incapable of crossing. Add to that my empathetic relationships with non-binary gender identified people, incarcerated people, and mentally and physically able-challenged people... simply put, humanizing God in any way prevents me from standing in awe and praise of God, represented in the Trinity, that for me is about love, truth, wisdom, and compassion.

Beyond my own being in the world, how people understand, visualize, and refer to God has infinite ramifications for how we understand, visualize, and refer to one another, and all of creation even beyond our own universe. Do you believe that human beings are the only sentient beings in existence? On our own small planet earth, many animals mate for life, mourn their dead, and exhibit forms of distress. As we discover more about other planets in our own universe, we find evidence of elements that could have or still do sustain life unlike our own. And there is universe upon universe.

God wants us to be free, so I believe it is up to us to free ourselves from the use of restrictive, exclusionary language in addressing and describing everything from God, to people's self-identity, and indeed to all that it is within our scope to try and put into words. Seekers names itself as an inclusive church, and yet inclusivity does not encompass all that we, as Christians, are called by God to consider. Communities such as ours, and individuals, can be inclusive by current language usage standards without being committed to caring deeply about the people we include, that is, without being empathic. How do we not just meet these gifts from God where they are, but ask if we can be part of their story, and vice versa? Adopting empathetic language opens doors upon doors for a more universal, even cosmic embracing of a truly inclusive future.

Revolution. The common reference of that word is used when describing the overthrow of governments or policies, yet it is what I am not alone in hoping for about our understanding of God and God's creation/s. Revolution also describes the

movement of the earth around the sun, the relationship of planets in our universe, and even our movement around one another and God. How then do we or can we use language as a tool of freedom for all of creation? Contained in the word revolution is a more profound word, evolution. Do we, not just Seekers, not just people of faith, but all people, have the courage to revolt and evolve to a much larger view of, well, everything? Rumi says *“Every storm the Beloved unfurls permits the sea to scatter pearls.” Perhaps every revolution that occurs permits all of us to scatter pearls.*

Let me offer some examples of what I am trying to say in more down-to-earth ways, on both sides of the discourse.

On December 5th, the Washington Post ran an article centered on a young woman, Natalia Mira, who took a stand at a high school protest by using gender neutral language in Argentina. Here is an excerpt from the article:

...teenagers are rewriting the rules of the language to eliminate gender. In classrooms and daily conversations, young people are changing the way they speak and write... Their efforts are at the center of a global debate over gender, amid the growing visibility of non-binary identities and a wave of feminist movements worldwide. A big part of the battle is being waged over language.

In the United States, the use of the singular “they” has become so common that Merriam-Webster in September [2019] adopted its use as a pronoun for non-binary people.

On the opposite side, in France, a school textbook promoting a gender-neutral version of French prompted the prime minister to ban the form in all official government documents. In Germany, dozens of influential figures protested local efforts to adopt gender-neutral language.”

The considered and considerate way that language is being

looked at in our ever-changing world is, I believe, important beyond our time and place. It shows the resiliency of people to grow and change in response to God's constantly changing creation. It verifies that we are co-creators with the Holy One. We revolt against inequality and injustice, we revolve around each other, and we evolve in response to need and circumstance.

By using empathetic, emancipatory language, especially in the context of our commitment to the tenets of our Christianity, and hardly any less than in communications with all others, we can expand our horizons. Perhaps even exponentially if we reprogram ourselves and cultivate our connectedness by recognizing and honoring our differences, and rejoicing in our commonality. When speaking of humans, we are all the same race.

In the same way, it seems to me to be of ultimate importance to use empathetic language at church. That certainly extends to how we refer to the unfathomable mystery of God. I would venture to say that most people grew up referring to God as He and His, and may still be comfortable and comforted in doing so, and I honor that as being as valid as what I believe. Nevertheless, I offer yet more food for thought. As I said, I am no theologian, so I can't tell you when and why referring to God as He became practice. Perhaps from the beginning of language, though I suspect it is only thousands of years old and has to do with the wielding of power. What I do know is that to most oppressed peoples, of which there is too long a list to name, denoting God as he is a hurtful reminder of colonization, military terrorism, and power dominance by the ones with the keys to the unholy and even the holy kingdoms across history.

I will be so bold as to ask you to think about your own wounded and broken places, your family and ethnic history, and the state of our world today, and consider your image of all the wonders of God in relation to your reflection.

Look around our own community and think about the diversity of identities that are claimed, and remember that we are all broken in some way. Think about our children as they listen to the Children's Word, and as they grow up in front of us in the blink of an eye, and what legacy we might give them as they venture into a future that belongs to them, and not us.

Yesterday, I read a piece in the Race Related newsletter of The New York Times – an excerpt from an upcoming memoir by Dionne Searcey, that moved me greatly. It seems a fitting end to this sermon inasmuch as it obliterates stereotypes, and offers a poignant reminder that there are prophets among us:

One afternoon, a few days after I moved to Dakar, Senegal, in 2015 to take on the role of West Africa bureau chief for The New York Times, I braved my first solo driving trip into the busy downtown to look for the city's version of IKEA.

I got lost amid the half-finished office towers and clogged streets and wound up going the wrong way on a one-way street. Frustrated, I rolled down my window to ask a man walking along the street for directions. He rounded my car, opened the passenger door and hopped in.

'What are you doing?' I said, startled, looking at the stranger in my passenger seat.

'I'm guiding you,' he said.

The man directed me through traffic straight to my destination – and then hopped out and went on his way before I had a chance to properly thank him...

Personal escorting was a common act of kindness that strangers offered to lost drivers. I was embarrassed for being nervous.

May we all find a stranger to guide us, as Jesus' first followers found Jesus.

Amen