

“The Names of God” by Deborah SokoLove

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Trinity Sunday

There is a certain irony, or perhaps synchronicity, in the fact that today is the secular celebration called “Father’s Day” at the same time that we are celebrating Trinity Sunday in church. As we just heard, the most common terms for the three Persons of the Holy Trinity are Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. While Father and Son are important in terms of both scripture and tradition, to address the Divine solely as male figures is to limit that which is without limits, and to suggest that human fathers and sons are somehow more god-like than human mothers and daughters. But the Holy One who creates, sustains, and frees us to live in eternal joy is more than two old men and a bird, as all too many paintings suggest. The Eternal Divine, who in our tradition is mysteriously both Holy One and Holy Three, is not male, not female, not neuter, but includes all genders and none, male, female, trans, fluid, and impossible to describe.

Seekers Church has been radically inclusive from its very founding. When Sonya Dyer and Fred Taylor called Seekers into being, the presence of Sonya as liturgist and Fred as preacher each Sunday was a visible symbol of the importance of both male and female leadership. As the pulpit was opened to others, the custom was established that when a woman preached, a man would be liturgist; and when a man offered the Word, a woman would be liturgist. Furthermore, when Communion was celebrated, a man and a woman would lead the congregation together, thus proclaiming in a practical, tangible way that in Christ, there is neither male nor female, but all are equal.

When Glen and I first came to worship here, there was much discussion about inclusive language. A frequent item at Circle Time was a reminder to change the pronouns (and sometimes other words) in the hymns to reduce the heavy weight of exclusively masculine imagery for both humans and the Divine. But in more recent years, we haven’t had much conversation about that. It’s as though once we adopted the Priests for Equality scripture translation known as *The Inclusive Bible*, and the New Century Hymnal, which is the result of much attention to inclusive language on the part of the United Church of Christ, that our work was done.

I stand here, today, newly convinced that not only is our work on naming the Divine not done, but that we have barely started. Indeed, the Priests for Equality translation has added a new problem, writing the Unpronounceable Name in a way that invites us to pronounce it. Let me explain.

When I was a child, my grandmother never called me, or anyone, really, by

their proper name. It wasn't that she didn't know our names, or that she didn't care. On the contrary, she was full of endearments, pet names, and other ways of talking both to and about people that made us all feel loved and somehow also avoided using our names. At some point, I must have asked her about that, because I remember her (or maybe it was someone else, trying to explain this odd behavior) saying something to the effect that saying a person's real name out loud would attract the evil eye.

Now, my grandmother was not an educated woman. She was born in a small village near Lodz, Poland. Her family was very poor, and she was sent out to work at the local textile mill at the age of 7. At 16, she got on a boat bound for New York, traveling alone in steerage with hopes for a brighter future. Instead, she found only another mill. Not long after that, she married, and soon had a child, my mother. So Grandma Mindle never got the chance to go to school and be taught that the evil eye is just a superstition. And even if she'd heard that, she would have gone on avoiding calling loved ones by their names, because names have power.

We post-enlightenment folks know that's just silly. Names are simply arbitrary collections of syllables, with no connection to the essential reality of the people or things that they point to. Just as it doesn't change the taste or consistency or any other tangible quality if I call my breakfast porridge or oatmeal, it shouldn't make any difference if you address me as Deborah or Debbie or even Barbara or Brenda (I've been called all of those, and a bunch of other names, as well).

But, of course, it does. If it didn't, no one would spend hours, days, weeks, months, agonizing over what to name a new baby. If it didn't, no one would ever change their name, or correct you when you get theirs wrong. Our names matter to us more than we like to admit. Indeed, there is research that shows that the names we are given at birth shape our identity in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. Sometimes, we try to live up to the name our parents gave us; other times we rebel, or ask to be called by our middle name, or a nickname, or just our initials. Some of us even change our names to something that seems more compatible to how we experience ourselves or how we want others to experience us.

So if our names matter to how we understand ourselves and other humans, what we call the Holy One also matters. Historically, the Divine Name mattered so much that Exodus 20:7 and Deuteronomy 5:11 (the verse we know as the 3rd Commandment) says, "You shall not misuse the name of the HOLY ONE your God, for the HOLY ONE will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses the divine name."

In our culture, we tend not to pay much attention to this commandment. When we think about it at all, we tend to assume that it has something to do with so-called "bad language." And it does, but only to the extent that we use the Holy Name to curse at someone or something. Scatological terms and other insults may be rude and crude, but that is not what this rule is talking about. What those early Israelites were warned against was thinking that they could use the special, holy, set-apart, divine personal Name for any purpose other than worship. Eventually, it was felt that saying it at all, even in worship, was to invite an unwelcome kind of divine attention.

When I was growing up, this commandment was taken very, very seriously. Not only did we not even try to pronounce those four Hebrew letters that are sometimes called the Tetragrammaton, but even when we spoke English we did

not say the word "God." Instead, we said "The Holy One" or "The Name" or found some other way to avoid pronouncing the unpronounceable Name of God. We even avoided writing out the Divine Name, putting another mark – like an asterisk or a hyphen – in place of the "o," lest the piece of paper on which the holy name was written fall on the ground or get dirty or worse. My grandmother would have worried that the paper might be used for conjuring a golem, or some other magical purpose.

Of course, this was not just some oddity of my family, or a custom left in some long-ago past. Today, all over the world, observant Jews continue to respect the name of God with customs like those I have just described, just as they have for thousands of years. And too many of us Christians ignore it, offending our Jewish friends by giving voice to the one Name that for them is too holy to pronounce, or write, or hear. And I cringe every time I hear it, because not only should we not be offending Jews, but there is good, historical reason for Christians to pay attention to how we name the Divine.

In his recent book, *The Divine Names and the Holy Trinity*, my colleague in systematic theology, Kendall Soulen, notes:

One of the chief ways Jews of the first century expressed reverence for God was by according special treatment to God's name, the Tetragrammaton. For example, Jews typically avoided pronouncing the divine name, and instead employed some surrogate in its place, such as "Lord" (Heb. 'adonai, or Gk. kyrios). What is less well known is that Jewish scribes also marked out the Tetragrammaton when copying the Scriptures, by writing it in a special way. Scribes used a wide variety of techniques for this purpose. Some used archaic Hebrew characters in texts that were otherwise written in the square Hebrew letters typical of the day. Others wrote the name using specially dyed ink, or replaced the name with a different symbol altogether, such as four dots or four diagonal lines.

Whatever the method, the practice of singling out the Tetragrammaton clearly served a religious purpose. At one level, it expressed reverence for the divine name, and so also for the God who bears it. At another, it reminded readers not to pronounce the name when reading the Scriptures aloud. [Soulen, R. Kendall, *The Divine Name(s) and the Holy Trinity, Volume 1*, Westminster John Knox Press. 2011, Kindle Locations 695-703]

Kendall shows that the New Testament scribes continued this practice, by using special orthography whenever they wrote Lord, God, Jesus, or Christ. He points out that many of our bibles do so, also, by printing the word LORD in small capitals whenever the original Hebrew or Aramaic would have had the Tetragrammaton.

That is not true, however, of the translation we use, which renders it not LORD, but rather ... sorry, I am unable to either write or pronounce what it does say, but I think you know what name I mean. So I was delighted to read in Kendall's book that he, too, thinks that we Protestants should think carefully about reviving the practice of respecting the special, personal, Divine Name by not saying it out loud.

Of course, what the translators of the Inclusive Bible were trying to do was to avoid the use of LORD, with all of its masculine connotations. And

when it was brought to their attention that their use of that other term was offensive to Jews, in later editions they reverted to the ancient usage and simply printed the Hebrew letters, leaving the reader to find a way to read the passage aloud. My own solution is to say "Holy One" when I encounter either the English transliteration or the actual Hebrew letters.

But the more I think about it, the more I realize that this respect is not just about four Hebrew letters. Rather, for me, at least, it is tied up in all the other ways that we do and do not describe the Divine. Which brings me back to the matter of gender.

Recently, I read a book called *Calling God She*, by my liturgical studies colleague Barbara Greene. Barbara's book tells of her sadness at the overwhelming maleness of the images of God in her growing up, and recounts her struggle as a pastor to teach her congregation to name the Divine in female terms. At the same time, I was asked to review a manuscript called *She Lives! Sophia Wisdom Works in the World* by Jann Aldredge-Clanton. This book consists of story after story of women and men who, like Barbara, have risked their livelihoods and sense of calling by insisting that our understanding of God is diminished when we use only male pronouns and masculine images when we speak and write about the Holy One. Aldredge-Clanton writes:

Growing up in the Baptist tradition, I learned from memory the hymn "He Lives." I loved singing this hymn to a lilting tune, increasing in volume along with everyone in the congregation as we came to the refrain after each stanza: "He lives, He lives, Christ Jesus lives today! He walks with me and talks with me along life's narrow way. He lives, He lives, salvation to impart! You ask me how I know He lives: He lives within my heart." It would not be until many years later that I could even imagine singing or saying, "She lives." I had learned to worship a God who was named and imaged as male. But while studying in a conservative Baptist seminary, I was surprised to find Her. I discovered female names and images for the Divine in the Bible and in Christian history. Studying classic doctrines of the Trinity in my seminary Systematic Theology class, a voice within asked, "If God can include three persons, can't God include two genders?"

Aldredge-Clanton puts the question humorously, but the stories in her book reveal the pain suffered by many women and girls who feel that their experience is negated by images of the Divine that are exclusively male. She, and the women she writes about, yearn to relate to the Holy in female form.

I, myself, have never felt that yearning, and, indeed, have felt uncomfortable in gatherings of women who talk about God as Mother or Goddess. As I examine that discomfort, I do not think that this is because I have internalized the casual (and often not-so-casual) misogyny that is so prevalent in our culture, or failed to expunge that misogyny, but rather that for me, God has always been beyond all notions of gender. In my own prayer life, and when I compose prayers for worship here and elsewhere, I am happy to find many expansive, creative ways of naming the Holy One that avoid gender altogether. For me, and I hope for many of you, rivers and fountains and rocks and wind may all be metaphors for the divine without evoking any sense of male, female, or any other gender. Such things simply are what they are.

However that may be, in reading Aldredge-Clanton's book, I found myself convinced that my own feelings are not the point. By refusing to use imagery for the Divine that is unambiguously female, I am not actively working to change the overwhelmingly maleness that the tradition has fostered. Angela Yarber, whose story Aldrege-Clanton tells, points out that genderless divine names and images are not enough. She writes,

Neutral inclusive language continues to allow socialized patterns of domination to shape perceptions of God and humanity. If men and women were truly treated equally, and if an equal number of people perceived God to be female as well as male, then such neutral language could work. But women and men are not treated equally in society, and certainly not in the church, and most people still perceive God in male terms. Until this shifts, neutral language is not sufficient to [move us] in the direction of justice.

Strong words. Strong words are needed when we are speaking of justice. Still, like some of you, I suppose, I struggle with the notion of calling God either "She" or "He." But as I and many of my colleagues at Wesley and elsewhere have noted, gender equality generally and inclusive language in particular seem to be no longer at the forefront of many people's consciousness. Father God is simply assumed in the prayers and theological writings of most of my students, even (or especially) the younger ones, as well as in the wider culture. That God might be addressed as something other than Father has never even crossed many of their minds.

Twenty-five years ago, I never thought that using language that includes all genders would still be an issue today. But I stand convicted that I have not been working hard enough to change the overwhelming perception of the maleness of God. I have hidden behind gender-neutral language, hoping that it would be enough to overcome the built-in biases that still make maleness the measure of humanness. Now, I realize that I need to do more. So, in addition to asking you to learn to reflexively substitute Holy One every time you see the Unpronounceable Name of God, I am asking you to help me learn to name the Divine in ways that affirm that the Holy One is not only beyond gender, but also includes gender. I don't think that I'm quite ready to affirm the Trinity as Mother, Daughter, and Holy Spirit, but today, in solidarity with those who need to hear it, I can begin to call God "She" a little more often. How about you?