

Worship for August 22, 2021

Prelude

Welcome and Announcements

*Call to Worship Joshua 24:15

Choose this day whom you will serve.

As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.

*Hymn 361 O Christ, the Great Foundation

Prayer

**O, Lord, our God,
wellspring of all that is,
you are the sea on which we float,
the wind that fills our sails,
the storm that buffets,
the calm that brings us peace.
Open our ears to hear your word,
our eyes to see your beauty,
our hearts to be warmed by your love.
Free us from the bonds of sin and selfishness,
and make us over to be bearers of your joy and peace. Amen**

First Reading Psalm 84

p.

Time With Our Young Disciples

Second Reading Deuteronomy 32:11; Job 38:29; Hosea 13:8; Psalm 131:2; Matthew 23:37-39

Morning Message "Bears, Eagles, Hens...and Jellyfish"

"The Bible says a minister is the husband of one wife. You can't be the husband of any wife. So, you can't be a minister."

I remember exactly where I was when I heard that pronouncement. I was standing in front of my grandmother's living room fireplace, dusting the mantle. I was seventeen and close to the end of my senior year in high school. My grandmother had just asked what I planned to study in college. I don't know what she expected, but, hearing that I wanted to be a minister wasn't it.

Her reaction shocked me. It was swift and harsh. It hurt my feelings...all of them. I thought she would be pleased. She lived at the church. My grandmother was someone through whom I saw God.

I never met my grandfather. He died before I was born. My dad would say he built houses and Baptist Churches while his mother raised four kids, ran a grocery store, served as church clerk, taught Sunday School, planned every church dinner, visited the sick, and helped the needy.

One of my favorite memories was watching her make unleavened bread for Communion. She moved around her kitchen with reverence, her dress covered with a big apron, her hair caught up in a net.

My grandmother's words stung that day. But, it served as a teachable moment.

You see, my growing faith and my grandmother's generations-deep faith had just crashed into each other. This would be the first, but certainly, not the last time I would be challenged by an interpretation of scripture that differed from mine. It would not be the last time my call to ministry would be called illegitimate.

Thankfully, I was raised in the more tolerant Presbyterian Church, one that was illumined by love and grace, not shuttered by prohibitions and judgment.

Youth group gave my life meaning at a critical time. It was a warm and welcoming environment. Discussion was how we learned about God and one another. We tackled hard topics like capital punishment, abortion, war, euthanasia. We asked questions that stretched our imaginations, like, is God male or female? We were taught that God is Spirit, that God is so awesome that it was not possible to adequately name or describe God with our limited language.

My grandmother and I never spoke of the ministry again. There was no room for discussion or imagining in her faith. There was also no reason to tell her that when Steve picked me up for youth group, we stopped at the Snack Shack for root beer on the way home.

Obviously, I did follow the call into ministry. I am blessed every day by this life. But, it hasn't always been positive. Nearly fifty years after that short exchange with my grandmother, women in ministry still run into those who question their faith and call. Some are refused fellowship in the community because they are women. Churches may still encounter criticism when led by a female pastor.

God calls both women and men into ministry. That's good news. We need both masculine and feminine perspectives in worship, in study, in fellowship, and in reaching out to the neighborhood and the world.

So, to that end, over the years, I have meditated on Scripture texts like the ones I read a few minutes ago: passages that describe feminine images of God. The ones that are most moving for me are the ones that depict God as Mother. While all women are not mothers, we are all, men and women, born of mothers. Developmental psychologists say this is our first love relationship.

Picture this: God comes to Job in the whirlwind and asks, "Where were you when the sea burst forth from the womb, when I made the clouds its garment, the dense clouds its wrap? From whose belly does ice come...who gave birth to heaven's frost?" God is giving birth to the forces of nature using the imagery of a woman giving birth.

In Isaiah, God says, "Like a woman in labor, I will moan; I will pant, I will gasp." God is in the process of giving birth to the whole creation, including God's children. And, apparently it is not an easy birth. It is hard work.

The synoptic gospels-Matthew, Mark, and Luke, describe the faith and life of Mary, the mother of Jesus, mother of God, offering her body and intentions for God's purpose.

The birth image continues in the gospel of John, when Jesus tells Nicodemus that if he wants to see God's kingdom, he must be born again. In Romans, Paul speaks of the whole creation groaning as it labors toward redemption and new life.

I think my favorite female image is Hosea 11:4, in which God says about Ephraim, "I was to them like those bent who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them."

These images describe the essence of mothering, the relationship of a woman to the child she loves. Such imagery describes a God who has the capacity and the desire to bend down, to lift up and hold, to stroke, to cover, hug, feed, bathe, and to hold us.*

And then, there are these lively pictures of God as a mother in the animal kingdom. The ones that say, "God is like a mother"...animal of some sort, and then describe the characteristics of that animal.

Like this one in Hosea:

God is like a mother bear raising her cubs. Affectionate, nurturing, resourceful, intelligent, and gentle... until she or those kids are threatened and then she mercilessly claws you to pieces.

Or this one in Deuteronomy:

God is like a mother eagle. The bird with the keen eye, so sharp it can detect another eagle fifty miles away and prepare for a possibly hostile encounter. She is strong and fearless. She nurtures her babies carefully and teaches them one by one how to fly. She takes them out for test runs and catches them if they begin to falter. As the babies learn to fly, the mother tears pieces of her nest away, so that there is less and less for the babies to cling to. And soon they are on their own.

And this one: God as a mother hen. Though it's another bird, it is certainly different from the magnificent eagle. We might well picture God as a mother hen in a red chintz apron standing at her kitchen counter pickling cucumbers. But, should a storm blow in, or a predator come lurking, she gathers her kids under her ample wings and shields them from harm.

My husband and I made it to the beach for a few days this summer. One morning, a group of excited, happy kids, accompanied by two women, took their place beside us. They may have been a family or maybe just friends, but it was obvious they had a close relationship and had done this more than once. They had a system.

Soon umbrellas, blankets, chairs, and coolers were in place and one of the women ran into the surf with the children, who were immediately shrieking and frolicking in the cold swirling waves.

Suddenly, there was an ear-splitting scream and one of the children, a little boy, came running out of the water and toward the woman under the umbrella. His cries were loud and distinct. If you've spent much time at the beach, you knew what had happened: he had been stung by a jellyfish.

The child was inconsolable. From a couple of umbrellas down the beach, a woman appeared with first aid supplies. They quickly examined and cleaned the wound and applied some topical medication.

Eventually the little guy calmed down. But, he had been so traumatized that he was not going anywhere near the water. Ever. The other kids invited him to play in the water with them, but, he just shook his head. He stayed under the umbrella with Mom. They played with some little trucks and had a snack. At some point he laid his head on her leg and took a nap. The other mom offered to take her place for awhile, but she silently waved her off. They were ok.

We never saw them return to the water that day. But, we had the feeling that all was well anyway. As we packed our stuff to head back inside, I thought, "God is like the mother who sits all day with her child, bearing witness to his pain and fear."

God calls pastors who will never be the husband of one wife. God calls women, men, and children to serve the church. God calls people whose faith journeys are smooth and unfettered. And God calls people whose faith journeys look more like a zip line over the New River Gorge.

God is like a mama bear with her cubs, eager to play and ready to defend; God is like a mother eagle nudging her young out of the nest when it's time to get their learner's permit; God is like a plump mother hen sheltering her biddies under wide-spread wings.

And God is like a mother whose gentle presence comforts her child more than salve on a jellyfish sting.

Affirmation of Faith

A Brief Statement of Faith, PCUSA, 1991

**We trust in God the Holy Spirit,
everywhere the giver and renewer of life.**

**The Spirit justifies us by grace through faith,
sets us free to love God and neighbor,
binds us together with all believers in the one body of Christ, the Church.**

The same Spirit, who inspired the prophets and apostles rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture, engages us through the Word proclaimed, claims us in the waters of baptism, feeds us with the bread of life and the cup of salvation, and calls women and men to all ministries of the Church.

In a broken and fearful world, the Spirit gives us courage to pray without ceasing, to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior, to unmask idolatries in Church and culture, to hear the voices of peoples long silenced, and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.

In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit, we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks and to live holy and joyful lives, even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth, praying, "Come, Lord Jesus!"

Hymn 581 Gloria Patri

Sharing Our Joys and Concerns
Pastoral Prayer and the Lord's Prayer

Presenting Our Tithes and Offerings
Prayer of Dedication

Almighty God, from whom all blessings flow, may you find us ever-thankful for the abundance of your gifts. Accept this offering as a sign of our thanks and praise. May they

**serve to strengthen our commitment to know, love, and serve you this and every day.
Amen.**

*Hymn 462 I Love to Tell the Story

*Blessing

And now, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God,
and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all,
now and always. Amen.

*Postlude

Announcements

Rally day announcement from Kevin