

"The Feminine Face of God"
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Genesis 2:18-25; Luke 1:39-45; Conjugal Love 168

Good morning. I'd like to extend a heartfelt Happy Mother's Day to all the mothers here today. I have always wanted to give a Mother's Day sermon, and I am so glad that I finally got the chance. It just so happens that I will also be preaching next month on Father's Day, and so I decided to offer two spiritual reflections on gender and the divine: on the feminine today and on the masculine next month.

On this Mother's Day, I'd like to ask how we can retrieve an understanding of the feminine aspects of God, and how this understanding might influence the ways we practice our spirituality. I'll start by making a few academic observations, then suggest some ideas for practicing women's spirituality, and then share a few personal thoughts.

Considering the feminine in our religious tradition is a critical but treacherous endeavor. In many ways, the Bible and the Christian tradition have not shown evidence of the equality of women's voices and lives. The texts of the Bible were written during an ancient time when a patriarchal system of government ruled the land. Far more stories in the Bible tell of women being ruined, deserted, raped, and murdered than they do of women being protagonists, directly receiving or speaking the word of God, taking action or emerging victorious. There are notable exceptions, however, such as the prophet Miriam who speaks the Lord's truth, Mary who receives an angel's blessing to bear in her body Jesus Christ, and two women who are the first to glimpse the empty tomb after Christ's death and to announce his resurrection to the other disciples. The gospel of Luke, in particular, contains several stories that are remarkable for their depiction of Jesus reaching across societal gender divisions to speak to and interact with women.

In recent decades feminist theologians have begun the critical task of re-reading the Bible from a woman's perspective, and re-formulating traditional Christian theology in ways that take into account women's experience. In keeping with that effort, I'd like to make a couple of comments about the scripture reading we heard today.

The first one depicts the creation of woman. There are actually two creation stories in the book of Genesis. The first one is the very familiar story of how God formed the world in the seven days of creation. The second creation story, which scholars believe was written by a different author and then added in next to the first, tells the story of creation in a garden—the garden of Eden. In this account, woman is created as a partner to the man. She is created out of man's rib, so that she becomes "bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh." This account has often been interpreted in the Christian

tradition as proof of women's secondary and derivative status. But there is another way to read it as well. The Hebrew word for man in this story is "ish," and the word for woman is "ishah," indicating that what was created were two aspects of one whole. The female and the male were created, we might say, as expressions of complementary aspects of human being, in the image of God. This might tell us, then, that God needed the male and the female to be made in God's image, indicating that the female is an integral aspect of God's own nature.

And now I'd like to turn to women's spirituality. How can our sense of practiced spirituality be informed by the perspectives of women? One of my favorite writers is Carol Flinders, who has explored many themes related to women's spirituality in the several books she has written. My favorite one is called *At the Root of this Longing: Reconciling a Spiritual Hunger and a Feminist Thirst*. Flinders has practiced meditation for 30 years and lived in an intentional community with a spiritual teacher. In her book, she examines meditative spirituality through a feminist lens and comes up with some compelling observations.

Now I know that our community here is not devoted to meditative practice, though I hope some of you do practice meditation. Even if you don't relate directly to these points, I hope you'll get the gist of their importance for women's spirituality. Flinders points out that traditionally, practitioners of contemplative meditation—think of Medieval Christian monks and nuns, as well as contemporary Buddhist meditators-- have been taught to do at least four things: First, be silent. Curb speech, still the mind, release thoughts of 'I' and 'mine.' Second, put others first, and put yourself last. Third, resist and rechannel your desires. Do not give in to the longings of the body. Fourth, enclose yourself. Turn inward, and move into a protective container.

These all seem to be powerful practices for spiritual transformation, until Flinders has the ground-breaking insight that these practices were, in all likelihood, formulated for men. Male spiritual aspirants who had left their worldly lives to take up these practices would have experienced a complete and jarring reversal of their usual freedoms. Being silent when they were used to having a voice and being heard; putting themselves last when they would normally put themselves first; resisting their desires when they had been used to acting on what they wanted; and enclosing themselves when they were used to having the freedom to move about in the world—all of these would have been, and probably still are, experienced by men as powerful and challenging spiritual practices that cancel their usual freedoms.

But how effective, Flinders wonders, are these same practices for women, who have been socialized in large part to already behave along the lines of these four spiritual guidelines? For women who don't speak up, who regularly put their own needs behind those of others, who don't give in to their desires and who stay enclosed in safe places, these spiritual practices might be confusing and ineffective. They might feel like confirmations of the secondary status of women in society. Or, they might make some women spiritual

aspirants feel that they had already achieved an advanced spiritual state without even trying!

Flinders wonders if actually the opposites of these four practices might be more effective spiritual practice for women, and these are what I'd like to share with you today on Mother's Day. First, find your voice. Tell your story, make yourself heard at the highest levels of every institution that affects your life. Second, know who you are. Establish your authentic identity or selfhood. Identify your needs and learn how to meet them. Third, reclaim your body and its desires from all who would objectify and demean it. Fourth, move about freely and fearlessly. Take back the streets, and take back the night.

These four counterpoints strike me as particularly insightful and potentially transformative for women. For those of us who have been socialized to be more or less passive, these feminist spiritual practices would be active and challenging—like the first four were for men, these counterpoints can bring women into opposite modes from how we often are.

What I'd like to offer as a final reflection on gender and spirituality is that male and female are the complementary, distinguishable parts of one whole, which is humanity created in God's image. Both the male and the female are needed for the fullest expression of the divine, and the fullest expression of our humanity. I don't mean necessarily that a male-female romantic union is a pinnacle of spiritual fullness, although some couples do find that. What I mean is that I think it is useful for all of us-- male, female, gay, lesbian or straight-- to ponder how maleness and femaleness is operative within us. I do think there is spiritual value in reaching toward our opposite, whatever we may feel that to be, for the sake of achieving complementarity and balance. I encourage you to try one of the eight spiritual practices I've discussed. Perhaps choose one that feels as if it would provide a good challenge for you. Do you think it would be more valuable for you to practice silence, or to find your voice? To put others first, or to find out who you are? To resist your bodily desires, or to reclaim your body? To enclose yourself in safe space, or to move about the world freely?

Going back to Mother's Day... I must confess I've always been irked by the images of mothers that we are handed this day by the Hallmark company. If you believed the imagery, you would think that mothers are all about warm, fuzzy, selfless love, fresh-baked cookies, teddy bears and flowers—and maybe a diamond pendant or two. It's never squared with my experience. I think of my great-grandmother Caroline, who gave birth to her tenth child in a tent in the New Mexico countryside in winter, as her cattle-ranching husband was moving them from Texas to Arizona seeking greater fortunes. I think of my grandmother Vera, a sweet soul who made a life on an Arizona dairy farm with her hardscrabble in-laws when she always longed to live in a city. I think of my mother Linda, a tomboy who at midlife came out as a lesbian, who taught English at the college level and became a photographer. I think of the night my first daughter was born, when after 11 hours of labor, three and a half hours of pushing without any painkillers, a narrowly-avoided C-section, 4th degree tears and a retained placenta, a nurse pushed me in a wheelchair and

my new baby in an isolette down a very long hallway in the wee hours of the morning, and I realized that mothers are warriors. There was nothing teddy-bearish about bearing a brand new human life through one's very body, with all the blood and pain that such an extraordinary feat requires. I felt that I was a warrior standing in a liminal space between God and humanity, and that somehow I had been able to let a masterfully divine occurrence take place in and through my body.

So instead of home-baked cookies and teddy bears, on this Mother's Day I would like to celebrate the strength and determination of women. My wish is for all women, and all mothers, to be fierce and wise, strong and loving, vocal and accepting. For women to find their full, authentic selves is a necessary activity of the divine, and for women to express themselves and their experiences brings a much-needed fullness to our religious understanding and imagination.

For the women here today, I hope you are on a journey of finding your voice and recognizing your fullest self as a reflection of God. And for the men here today, I hope you will consider the feminine balance within yourself, and see how you might grow by embracing it.

For as we heard in the gospel of Luke: "Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished."

Happy Mother's Day. Amen.