

The First Rule of Theology, Again
Inclusive Language and Church Division
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The first rule of theology, as introduced a couple of Sundays ago, seemed simple enough. God is greater than the words we use to describe Him; and even though I just used the word “Him” to describe God, we all know that God is greater than the categories of male and female, too. But even though the first rule of theology seems simple, it is hard to apply it without running into a controversy or two. I was reminded of this a year or so ago, when I traveled to Missoula, Montana to attend my nephew’s high school graduation ceremony, which turned out to be a reunion visit with old friends that I had made there over thirty years ago. My sister had arranged for me to see just about everyone I knew in the three days that I visited with her. What a great visit, and an eye-opener, too.

My first visit to Missoula was back in 1970, when I met some “Jesus freaks” (as they were then called), who were connected with what was once a traditional congregation in the University-area of Missoula, and part of the Evangelical Covenant Church, your run-of-the-mill denomination with Swedish roots headquartered in Chicago. Its connection with the University-community infused new life into this older, smaller, and, to some degree, declining congregation, a situation that was not uncommon during the tumult of change that came with the 1960’s. It was amazing to witness how this traditional congregation embraced these younger Christian faces and adapted to the trends that were arriving with their presence. The life of that congregation came to be dominated by the influx of newer members, who came from all over the United States – Massachusetts, New York, Illinois, Oklahoma, Oregon, and Connecticut, too.

Change was a sign of the times, and these changes had a dramatic effect on that Covenant Church. New forms of tent-making ministries were created, which allowed for many of these young people to support themselves while they tried to lay down roots in Missoula. They formed a wood-working business, with an arts-and-crafts side and an outlet for selling custom-made dining room tables and chairs to match. They also established a restaurant to provide employment for their younger members, and to help fund their coffee house ministry, which responded to the need for outreach among traveling transient folks who were drawn to this university community at the crossroads for two major interstates, one heading west to the Pacific, the other heading north to Canada. These ministries were innovative, fascinating, ground-breaking, and kind of successful.

What I discovered with my recent visit was kind of ironic, but illuminating, too. When this younger generation of Covenant Church members became older, there were newer movements pushing for change originating from the University community. Some time in the 1990’s, there was a push to expand our language for God to include female imagery

as well as traditional male imagery. The group of revolutionary reformers whom I had met in the 1970's, who had pioneered expansions of ministry into the restaurant business, into elder care, into outreach to homeless transients passing through Missoula, changing the life of their church in so many ways, couldn't embrace the changes that this new generation of impassioned reformers pursued. The congregation stumbled, became divided, then closed its doors, and no longer exists. The issue at stake was the desire to formally and at worship refer to God as *Nurturing Mother* as well as *Heavenly Father*. We all know that God is neither mother nor father. God is God, the Creator of all that is, seen and unseen. We all know that God is greater than the language we use to describe Him. But that doesn't mean that the language we use to describe God doesn't matter to us. This language matters a whole lot, more than many might imagine.

Lutherans have long been familiar with those who have suggested alternative renderings for the Trinity, some gender neutral, some very feminine and maternal. *Romans 11:36* refers to the Triune God as the One from whom, through whom, and in whom we have our being and offer our praise. *Revelations 4:8* speaks of God as the One who was, who is, and is to come. The *Book of Common Worship* has formulated constructions of the Trinity based on the Baptism: Overflowing Font, Living Water, and Flowing River. Augustine pioneered a classic back in the 4th century C.E., building on the foundation of faith and life in the Church: God the Father as the *Lover*, God the Son as the *Beloved*, and *Love* as the Spirit's power that binds them together as one. When it comes to the controversy at hand, another modern-day classic drawing on images of Scripture – *Isaiah 49:15*, *Matthew 3:17*, *Isaiah 46:3* – refers to our Triune God as Compassionate Mother, Beloved Child, and Life-giving Womb. These images, while Biblical, tend to elicit more a reaction of suspicion than one of willing embrace.

It's no secret that feminine images of God are not new. Jesus referred to God's concern for His people as a mother-hen brooding over her chicks. (Luke 13:34) Hosea referred to God as a mother bear committed to protecting her cubs. (Hosea 13:8) In the Hebrew, the very word for *spirit* and *breath* is feminine. But let's face it, thinking of God as feminine, and giving up the reference to God as *Father* in relation to His *Son* in order to embrace terms of *Mother* and *Child* has led to resistance in many Christian communities, partly because it seems that in taking control of our language we feel like we are trying to take control of God. This is partly related to piety. In his commentary on Genesis, Dietrich Bonhoeffer describes the story of sin as related to our turning the gift of being made in *the image of God* into the power to become *like God*. In taking control of the language we use to describe God, are we honoring what it means to be made in God's image, or are we taking hold of the power that allows us to determine who God is and what that means?

Another underlying issue at stake has to do with what we think about how we know what we know about God. Do we control what we know about God, or does God determine what we can know about God? Is it something we find out on our own, or is revelation the key? If revelation is the key, then our knowledge of God is limited by what God tells

us. We traditionally root our knowledge of God in the Scriptures, and have been traditionally bound in what we know about God to the words that are given with the Word of God, the Bible. While it's true that certain concepts that are key to our understanding God are not found in the Bible, concepts like the Trinity, the images that inspire this concept are funded by the raw material of praise expressed throughout the Scriptures. References to Father, Son, and Spirit abound in the Scriptures, whereas Mother, Child, and Life-giving Womb, however interesting and illuminating in displaying a triune connection, are images that seem to be more of our own choosing.

Once the issue of revelation and how we know what we know about God takes center stage, we can begin to understand the strains that arose around the call for change at the Covenant Church in Missoula. These reformers of the 1970's stood squarely in the camp that wanted the language of the Bible to come alive in the life of the church and in the lives of God's people. These spirit-filled, evangelical *Jesus freaks*, if you will, enjoyed using the language of Scripture in a way that expressed a vibrant sense of Jesus' presence in our lives and a lively sense of the Spirit's power active among us. The change these reformers advocated was not one of taking control of the language we use to talk about God, but allowing that language to take control of us. Their call for change accepted the authority of the Bible as the Word of God, and insisted on a sense of immediacy through which God's Word speaks to us through our Lord's presence alive among us. Oddly enough, the very changes they sought made them resistant to calls for change that seem to diminish the authority of the Bible in talking about God.

The truth is that calls for change to move away from using only masculine images in speaking about God have not arisen in a vacuum. In some respects, this issue is just the tip of the iceberg in a world that is challenging the rigidity that has often followed from the historic models of male dominance that have formed our world. In business, in law, throughout the country and our culture, changes that challenge and correct past injustices are reshaping the institutions we've grown up with, the world we live in, as well as the language we use. I am sure that all of us want to make sure that we are not using religion to hang on to what is wrong with the past, or to insulate ourselves from the inevitability of change, which often brings progress. Yesterday, at the John Knight Center in Akron, our Synod Assembly wrestled with some of these same dynamics, focusing on an issue that will not go away, an issue that will probably dominate the Churchwide Assembly in August, that thorny cluster of issues dealing with gender identity and human sexuality.

It's been on the agenda for more than two decades now. After having been tabled for several years, it's back, still generating controversy, while adding very little to the substance of debate. Actually, much of what we talked about had to do with updating church practice to keep up with where the law of the land had already been since the 1990's. Our church has not been a leader on this issue, except where the challenge has been to encourage compassion and condemn violence. I think that one of the big reasons the church remains engaged by this issue is because there have been too many times

when we have been behind the curve on matters of social justice. There was the issue of slavery back in the 19th century, resistance against the Nazis at the beginning of the 20th century, raising awareness about the mistreatment of Native Americans in our generation.

There have been too many times when the institutions of religion were simply too slow to change, along with being too tolerant of past sins and the injustices these sinful practices perpetuated. We understand the need to change, not simply with the times, but especially for the sake of faithfulness. The questions that trouble us have to do with our worrying that in pursuing change we will undermine important truths that our time-honored traditions have been cultivated to preserve. We understand the need to change for the sake of faithfulness; but are we rejecting the authority of Scripture as the place where God has chosen to reveal Himself? Are we usurping from God the power to determine what God desires and demands?

Our Gospel Lesson offers a look at the dynamics that land us right in the middle of the tensions that we're struggling with. On the one hand, we know that Jesus' call to *love one another* is precisely what requires us to listen to everyone in the conversation calling for change. On the other hand, part of loving one another *as he has loved us* involves *keeping God's commandments*. That's the rub. Who determines what God desires and demands? In listening to John's references to love in his First Epistle during these past six Sundays, we have learned that God's love is not a *tabula rasa*, a blank tablet of emotion waiting for its meaning to be determined by the current content of the day. The meaning of God's love is found by looking at the story of Jesus, and not just looking at it but following it, and not just following Jesus' story on the printed page of Scripture, but following it with the lives we lead. We call that *discipleship*.

Somewhere between loving one another and keeping God's commandments, a promise is given. Jesus says that he has told us these things so that *his joy may be in us* and that *our joy may be full*. (John 15:11) That's the promise we're looking for, hoping for, and praying for. From what I observed yesterday during our Synod Assembly, and from what I have experienced every time this cluster of issues is raised, the fullness of joy we await has not yet arrived. Paul understood that this kind of thing happens a lot in the life of the church. "*Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience*" ... and with prayer, and with resolutions at synod assemblies that encourage us to love and listen. (Romans 8:24-25)

We know that the key to the joy Jesus promises is found through keeping our focus on learning to love one another. We trust that somewhere in between our loving one another and our keeping God's commandments, we will find the joy we seek, the joy Jesus promises. That's the hope, and that's our prayer, which we offer faithfully and without ceasing ... in Jesus' name. Amen