



Reflections on God “the Father”*

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There is a remarkable story in 1 Esdras 3. Darius, the king of Persia, has held a great feast for all of his kingdom. When he retires for the evening, some of his men decide they should hold a debate on what is the strongest power in the world. One argues that wine is the strongest, another that the King is—presumably hoping that the King will be pleased by his argument—and the third, Zerubbabel, argues that “Women are strongest, but truth conquers all.” As he makes his case, he concludes with a hymn to truth.

Truth is great and stronger than all else. The whole earth calls on truth; the sky praises her. All created things shake and tremble; with her there is no injustice. There is injustice in wine, in kings, in women, in everyone, and in all their works. There is no truth in them; they shall perish in their injustice. But truth abides and is strong forever; she lives and rules for ever and ever.

Though the text will not be my focus, we can cling to it passionately throughout this conversation. As Christian intellectuals and leaders we need to think about this issue, carefully and faithfully. At the outset I need to state outright some of my assumptions and premises. As everyone knows, this topic is a favorite one for feminists, and it would be impossible to make a case against God the Father in much the same way as one could argue against the arms race and center our discussion on what might be the political implications of these ideas.

But I would prefer to think about the issue as a poet who cannot draw anything but a Lutheran breath. As a poet, I must think a great deal about how language shapes our reality and how our realities shape the languages we choose to describe our realities. But my entry into that point of view does not free me from any feelings of loyalty to my feminism or my faith. I think sexism is sin, perhaps the most fundamental and universal sin, after the original sin that our first mother committed, when in the first recorded theological debate, she said to the serpent, as Luther notes, “perchance,” and thus failed to believe.

*Adapted from an address delivered at a convocation at Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary. The style of oral delivery has been largely preserved, as well as some references to the local setting. The author was a Visiting Associate Professor in Pastoral Theology and Ministry, 1981-83, at Luther Northwestern.

Calling sexism sin, however, does not minimize it (an odd qualification if I’ve ever heard one); it just puts it in a place where Lutherans can best deal with it. Knowing that it pervades and besmirches all of our lives, that I am just as guilty of it as I am victimized by it, as all men or

women are, should give us braver and freer hearts as we live with it and fight it. Thinking that this is a problem we can completely eradicate by the next decade only brings despair and bitterness and finally burn-out and cynicism.

Having said all that, I hope it will be possible for us to become engaged in some kind of conversation in the service of Our Lady Truth. As David Tracy puts it in a recent book:

Real conversation occurs only when our usual fears about our own self-image die: whether that fear is expressed in either arrogance or scrupulosity matters little. That fear dies only because we are carried along, and sometimes away, by the subject matter itself into the rare event or happening named “thinking” and “understanding.” For understanding happens; it *occurs* not as the pure result of personal achievement but in the back and forth conversation.¹

In the hope of that delightful prospect, trusting each other to care enough to argue, think hard thoughts, and grow together, let us begin.

“I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth.” It is the confession of Christians through the ages and a confession that any serious dawdler in the tradition, feminist or no, must ponder every now and then. From here, it looks like the confession that God is the Father is fairly securely set in our tradition. But what does it mean to say that God is the Father?

The image of God is perhaps more pervasive in the minds of people than it actually is in the Bible. Western art is filled with pictures of God as an old man with a beard looking down out of heaven. Alice Walker’s latest book *The Color Purple* is the story of a young black woman’s attempt to imagine God after discovering the hard truth that God is not only male, he’s white:

Ain’t no way to read the bible and not think God white, she say. Then she sigh. When I found out I thought God was white, and a man, I lost interest. You mad cause he don’t seem to listen to your prayers. Humph! Do the mayor listen to anything colored say?...Well, us talk and talk bout God, but I’m still adrift. Trying to chase that old white man out of my head. I been so busy thinking bout him I never truly notice nothing God make. Not a blad of corn (how it do that?) not the color purple (where it come from?). Not the little wildflowers. Nothing.²

It appears that the further from one’s own likeness God is, the greater the religious difficulties, even for the faithful. What must it be like, women have often wondered, to look to the heart of the universe and see one’s own image, as men are able to do? Dante, in the *Divine Comedy*, seems to like it. But does it do

¹David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 101.

²Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York: Harcourt-Brace-Jovanovich, 1982) 166.

damage to me, I wonder, to look out there at God the Father, to look at the male Savior and feel that my femaleness is not affirmed in the same way it is when my brothers do? It clearly has damaged both of us, I think.

As a poet, however, what bothers me most about this problem is basically its literalism. God conceived as Father, in figurative language, has become so familiar a statement about God that it has ceased to be figurative; it has almost become a dead metaphor, and it fails to surprise the way good metaphors do. The religious dangers for that are obvious. It was most vividly stated by a recent letter to a church paper in which the writer argued that everyone knew that God was a man. An intriguing notion. One might think the writer was being clever and even maybe Christocentric in his argument, but the tone of desperation was too obvious. Only the bravest exercise of my Christian charity restrained me from sending him J. B. Phillip's book *Your God Is Too Small*.

So what one learns at the very beginning of this pursuit is that it is amazingly simple to make God into one's own image, even though we are careful to use the images of the Bible and the Christian tradition. Those images cease to have their old numinous power, and God is domesticated and rendered impotent, incapable of frightening, judging, or moving us. This God becomes, very easily, the sleek and proud justification of all that I am. God is good, the man says, showing off his new Cadillac to the preacher. The preacher's just a dreamer, they say, don't know a handsaw from a wrench, a touchdown from a basket, and he's always against nuclear war. Such literalism damages us all, and we can all think how we have reacted against such talk in our own style of life and in our own theological reflections. The insistence that God must be male, literally male, always brings up in the mind of the feminist Mary Daly's aphorism: if God is male, then male is God.

But if one can push beyond the literal, from the mind set that takes the sentence "God is our Father" in the same way it takes "the snow is white," how do we take the sentence then? How do we understand it as some kind of figurative speech? What goes on in the mind when one meets figurative speech?

The categories I will use to think about figurative language are from Kenneth Burke, a philosopher of language and rhetoric. Though there are some problems with his categories as he explains them, the categories he uses are fairly general in the history of Western thought. To say God is the Father is to speak in terms of a trope, or figure of thought. The school boys of the middle ages and Renaissance learned the tropes when they studied rhetoric, and Shakespeare filled his dramas with them-famous lines like "All the world's a stage" or "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" can be classified and named as kinds of tropes. Martin Luther's education was also steeped in such categories.

Burke selects out what he calls the four major tropes: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony/dialectic. His interest in them is not "their purely figurative usage, but...their role in the discovery and description of 'the truth.'"³

Metaphor, Burke says, "is a device for seeing something *in terms* of something else. It brings out the thisness of a that, or the thatness of a this."⁴ The

³Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (New York: G. Brazillier, 1955) 503.

⁴*Ibid.*, 503.

snow is like feathers. We understand it because the whiteness of the snow and its fluffy qualities share essential attributes with feathers. But we block out the differences too: the snow is wet, the feathers are dry.

To speak of God metaphorically, we could use the common biblical figure in Deuteronomy 32:11:

As an eagle stirreth up her nest, fluttereth over her young, spreadeth abroad her wings, taketh them, beareth them on her wings: So the Lord alone did lead [Jacob].

The metaphorical language of this epic simile gives us a new perspective on God by forcing us to see God through the eagle's care for her young. There's something strange and wonderful about it, and one can learn a great deal about God from it.

To speak of God using metonymy would be to think of having to convey some intangible idea in terms of something tangible. Perhaps the pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night would be a metonymy for God. Burke says that the strategy for this trope is one of *reduction*, so it is most often the strategy of allegory. If we close our eyes and think of an apple, a tree, an Edsel, and now, justice, we may have a metonymy happen to us. The chances are fairly good that our mind goes blank when we get to justice, but then after a moment we quickly supply an image—perhaps the image of the woman holding the scales with blindfolds on. To explain an abstraction, that which is beyond our ability to contain in rational discourse or definition, one needs an image. Jesus used the strategy most of the time in his parables and preaching. He was always comparing the kingdom of God to ordinary, homely things around him. And such preaching made his words memorable.

The third strategy is synecdoche, a trope very like metonymy, according to Burke. But instead of reduction, synecdoche is interested in representing the greater or the whole thing with only a part. The trope is very commonly used in ordinary journalism when reporters say that “the heads of state met today in Versailles” or “the hand that signed the paper.” In God-talk, one can speak of much that is true about God by naming God the Father. The name represents much of what is true about God. But no one can really assert that, as a figure, it says *everything* about God. Also, as a figure of speech, it limits what one can say about God. While God is Father, the term is so controlling that while one is in that figure, all the references to God become, quite naturally, male.

I shall return to that shortly, but first I must conclude with the fourth category: irony/dialectic. Burke says that these must be handled in terms of character or idea. The character comes on the scene, and our expectations that he or she will do something are always in some sort of conversation, but then we are surprised (if it's a good story) at how the character or the idea is changed or revealed. The Gospel of Mark is filled with such kinds of irony. The disciples—and we as readers much later on—have a set of expectations about Jesus that are never fulfilled quite as we expected they would be.

Martin Luther might be said to be one who nearly builds a theology on this trope. Irony is the best way to understand the world of paradoxes into which Luther introduces us in his work. The idea of the hidden God, the various masks of God, and the work of God always being hidden under its opposite sign—all

are tropes, ways of thinking about God in some kind of figurative or playful way.

The main problem with these figures is not, however, that they are literalized. It is, more

likely, that our need as theologians is very strong to take those images lightly and then try to abstract them into eternal truths. I understand the urge, but it is in the clash of these images that we learn something about God, not in our smoothing out all of the paradoxes and contradictions.

I think it is safe to say that Luther could not abide that urge on the part of theologians to look behind the image. In his *Colloquy at Marburg* and in many other of his arguments with the Anabaptists, Luther was always insistent that it was the thing itself that spoke, through the promise of God. The bread and wine, as well as the water, are symbolic of nothing. He frequently used the word *synecdoche* to describe what happens when the celebrant distributes the elements and says, “This is my body.” And even though it was—and is—important for theologians to ponder just what that means (Is Jesus both in heaven and in the believer’s mouth?), Luther could best understand it by thinking in terms of synecdoche. It is both/and, he said, and he took it on faith.

I think one could argue that, though Luther would hardly be a source for feminist theology, he would understand the argument I am making that the church begin to exploit more of the biblical images for God in terms of synecdoche. In his article “Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper,” which was written in 1528 against Zwingli and others who thought like him, Luther wrote an interesting response to the inability of his opponent to

conceive of God’s omnipresence except by imagining God as a vast, immense being that fills the world, pervades it and towers over it, just like a sack of straw, bulging above and below, precisely according to the first, bodily, circumscribed mode. Then, of course, Christ’s body would be a mere phantom and apparition, like an immense straw-sack with God and the heaven and the earth inside.

Wouldn’t that really be a crude way to think and speak of God?

But this is not the way we speak. We say that God is no such extended, long, broad, thick, high, deep being. He is a supernatural, inscrutable being who exists at the same time in every little seed, whole and entire, and yet also in all and above all and outside all created things. There is no need to enclose him here, as this spirit dreams, for a body is much, much too wide for the Godhead; it could contain many Godheads. On the other hand, it is also far, far too narrow to contain one Godhead. Nothing is so small but God is still smaller, nothing so large but God is still larger, nothing so long but God is still longer, nothing is so broad but God is still broader, nothing so narrow but God is still narrower, and so on. He is an inexpressible being, above and beyond all that can be described or imagined.⁵

That gives us a bit of room to move in. And I think that Brother Martin would have to admit that even his *he* in reference to God is limiting. But from God, Luther moves directly to Jesus—as we must. Even though there is in Jesus’ rhetoric a good variety of images for God, we must face directly that Father was

⁵*Luther’s Works* 37 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1961) 228.

by far his most frequent name for God. It may, in fact, be the only thing that feminists don’t like about Jesus. But why the recurring image of the Father?

To begin with, there are serious mythological reasons for it. The father sky god mates with the female mother earth goddess, and naturally the sky god is father because it is the woman who brings forth the child. There is Mary, and biologically it makes sense for Jesus to have as his progenitor, the father.

In addition to that, the image of the father is one of almost universal application. Though fatherhood is a bit more difficult to prove than motherhood, we all have had some kind of relation to a father, whether one in the flesh, or in our imaginations. It is a compelling relationship, no matter whether good, bad, or indifferent. It is just there. And some do argue, with some success, that Jesus, by using an intimate name for the father, *abba*, is really intending to strike at the heart of the patriarchal system.

Disregarding for a moment Jesus' frequent use of the image in the Gospels, we have to consider for a moment what is probably the fundamental question before us: When we think of God the Father, do we first think of our own fathers, or do we think of a father that is totally unlike our own, The Father, God? At this point the hermeneutical circle may close, but I think our categories may help us think a bit more clearly about it. If we are thinking that God is like an earthly father, we are seeing God and our own fathers as sharing in some essential qualities that give us a new perspective or relation to God, although in this case, not all that new an experience. And there is something of a rub.

Some, whose fathers are like mine, see that image as a patient, kind and forbearing soul who always listens and cleans up the house. I feel entirely comfortable with the idea of God as being like my father. Others, whose fathers are remote and powerful—maybe even a bit terrifying—have another set of emotions evoked when they hear the name of God the Father. I suspect Martin Luther had such images in his head whenever he heard the phrase God the Father. Still others, who have had no personal experience with their own biological fathers, may have constructed an ideal father; those whose fathers have been cruel and abusive may take refuge in the notion that God the Father is unlike every earthly father and need daily to sing the hymn stanza, “No earthly father loves like Thee.”

A word with such universal powers of evocation cannot be applied to God as though that name will mean something entirely outside of experience simply because it is different in the Bible. It is not very easy to separate our own immediate emotional responses simply because we are trying to be theologically correct.

Further, our understanding of God as Father, or Mother, is perhaps intensified even more fully after we have begun to think of ourselves as parents, an experience that all of us can imagine, with more or less success. That experience, Luther said once at table, taught him a great deal about God. Melancthon replied that if God loved us more than parents loved their own children, then indeed, God's love for us is great.⁶

⁶*Luther's Works* 54 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967) 432 (no. 5497).

So for Jesus to insist on the imagery of God as Father was to claim an extraordinary intimacy with God, but one entirely within reason. Christians have to take him seriously on this issue, even Christian feminists. Jesus, however, does a nice thing with the image. He claims over and over again that if we have seen him, we have seen the Father. That can be terribly encouraging if one thinks of what Jesus does for women; it is good news. But it is quite different

if I am supposed to imitate Christ. It would kill me, of course, to have to do so, but it would also deny some part of me that could never be like Jesus.

Jesus' attitude of respect for women was matchless, even in this time. I need not recite that litany of grace; there are books aplenty on the subject. But what really interests me about Jesus, as we consider this topic, is the story he tells about the woman looking for the coin. Couched between the story of the lost sheep and the lost son, the story tells in a rather direct way that Jesus is perfectly free to picture God as being like a woman, and a woman of industry and perseverance. The woman is a surprising one, too. She is not a mother. She does not even have family as supporting cast. She runs to tell her friends and neighbors and puts on a party for them. Except for her sweeping there's not much stereotype here.

Moreover, Jesus has a remarkably unsentimental attitude toward mothers: there are no sentimental "boy and his mother" stories here. In Luke Jesus responds rather sharply to the woman crying out, "Blessed be the womb that bore you..." with the statement, "Blessed rather are those who hear God's word and keep it." Just before that he had said that those who love mother and family more than him are in some trouble. And when his mother and brothers are announced to him once, he replies, rather archly, "Who are my mother and brothers?" This is no refusal of the little boy to be swallowed up by the eternal mother. He's doing something else. Jesus takes women as persons in their own right. Being a mother is one way that a woman can claim, in some fashion or another, a valuable relationship with men and it is, in many cultures, the only way a woman can achieve or maintain status. And so Jesus may well be doing something quite different by refusing to see women only as mothers. But such talk brings us into the really troubling question: What about God as mother, the goddess?

Many feminist theologians have made it fairly clear—after their searching for the suppressed images of women in the images we have of God—that the mother goddess is not necessarily a solution for this problem. Simply to turn around the whole system from father to mother is no answer. For the goddess is a pure creation of patriarchy and is troublesome for women. For it could be used as a way to make absolutely clear what women and men are supposed to be like: the father God for men, and the mother God for women.

The goddess is just what the Moral Majority needs, a deity that proves that women should stay home and raise children while their husbands are out hunting—a paradigm much abroad these days in Washington. The goddess is dangerous for both men and women. But having said that, let me hasten to add that this in no way releases us from the obligation to search the Scriptures diligently for pictures and images of God, which—in their variety and clashing—can disclose something new and surprising about how God works in our lives.

And here we are on the nub of another problem: the Old Testament God the Father is largely a construct of the New Testament. The imagery is not very common in the Old Testament. And while the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament will never be solved, I hope, I like to think about Luther who was a profoundly able Old Testament scholar and was able to take it seriously as his mentor Paul did. If Christ indeed is the end of the Law, then Luther could, by clinging to Christ, get back into those stories and take them as his own. And that he did. And there one finds an abundance of images for God as female, and one can find numerous books on the subject in the library.

But I am left with an overwhelming question at the end of all this: Is God the Father Yahweh? I'm not going to answer that, but I do have some opinions about what has been happening to Yahweh of late. Most new readers of the Hebrew are always struck and then delighted by the answer God gives when Moses asks him, "Which god are you?" and the answer comes from the burning bush, "I am that I am," or "I will be who I will be." The statement is remarkably free of image, and it makes God into an actor or a verb—except not in that sentence! The name Yahweh in English has become a name, and the one who has the ineffable name seems to me to be overly male, even if the images of Yahweh are very rich with other possibilities. The later tradition that this name was not to be spoken has a good bit of wisdom in it. I am always shocked to hear it spoken and fully expect to be struck leprous one day for carelessly speaking of this verb which has become a noun in English.

But what all that proves is that we can so easily domesticate God; the names of God can begin to be ordinary and un revelatory. The ancient Israelites had an insight there, and one we could well use. We could get rid of a lot of sexist terminology for God if we spoke of God as "the one who...."

I think it is precisely at this point that the feminist perspective in theology is so exciting and productive of new insights into the nature of God.

At the beginning of the Bible, I as a woman learn that I too was created in the image of God, that the human pair was made male and female, in God's image. So when I look out into the universe, I should be able to see my own image staring me back. And no one, not even Luther, can prevent me from exploring that for all it is worth.

Truth conquers all. I know from the biblical record that I, for reasons I cannot understand, am sinful and quite capable of curving in upon myself or failing to believe God's goodness toward me. And because of that, I am fully capable of making God in my own image and thereby sinning. If that is what I am doing now, I cry out for correction, or I must cry out with Luther that if anything I have done so far is unScriptural or heretical, I need to hear the arguments against my work.

Let me make some clarifying statements and then go on to the conclusion. Few Christian feminist theologians want to get rid of God the Father. That image is there, and to excise it from the Bible would be silly. But there are other images there, and they need to be discovered and explored—images that can help us see new things about God, graceful things, even terrible things.

To illustrate: A student in my preaching lab gave me a sermon on God as Mother. I found the sermon disturbing in the extreme for several reasons, and those reasons I need to explain to you.

Her sermon described how we react with both rage and terror when our mothers show us, again and again, how completely they know us, and no matter where we go to hide, they always know just what is going on. In like manner God knows us and loves us.

I found that to be an entirely different kind of religious experience, and I think I suffered a kind of death on hearing it. It brought home to me, as nothing else in my life had, how annoying grace can be, and how relentless God is. As I said at the beginning of this essay, I have no trouble with God the Father because my own father is so kindly and, like most pastors, blind to human

fault. On the other hand, there is my mother. She is not blind to anything, and her ruthless, loving gentleness can turn granite into glass.

The circle closes. But in the clash of images something new is born. That God is like a mother, even like my mother, completes something that I find troubling, but intensely true and healing, like salt on the wound. God, of course, knows all there is to know about me and still loves me in Jesus Christ. And there is where I fly.

There is much more to say. But some final things do need to be said. I think that one of the problems we face today in Lutheran circles is that feminism has most frequently been presented by those with non-Lutheran theologies. But I insist that it is possible to be a Lutheran feminist for Christ's sake. And we all have to help each other with this business.

As a member of several women's groups, I must say that these are the most exhilarating times to be alive. Women are asking fundamental and exciting questions about where they fit into this thought. And Lutheran feminists are struggling to put their understanding of Lutheran social ethics together with their feminism. It is difficult to do, and it has not really been done before.

But the cause of feminism can be somewhat separated from the topic of feminism. The questions I have asked in this essay are theological questions going to the heart of the gospel, the biblical records, and our tradition. Why we call God our Father, what it means to be created in the image of God, and the variety of biblical images for God—these are topics that are fundamental to the theological quest, and I hope we can participate together in that quest with a passion for truth. For the God who seeks us like the woman sweeping the floor in search of one lost coin is about to put on a party; in fact we can hear her crying now through the streets of heaven: "Rejoice, for I have found what was lost; let's have a party!"