

The Rev. Joanne Sanders
Stanford Memorial Church
November 19, 2006

The Limits of Language

*"There is no Holy One like the Lord, no one besides you;
there is no Rock like our God. Talk no more so very proudly,
let not arrogance come from your mouth; for the Lord is a God of knowledge,
and by him actions are weighed." ~1 Samuel 2: 2-3*

Shortly after completing an undergraduate degree and embarking on the beginning of a new career, I moved into a rented house with 3 other women, all of us freshly eager to experience life beyond college. One of our housemates often used the language of idioms, those private and peculiar phrases used as a form of natural expression.

One day, she confronted me, hands squarely on her hips and said: "Joanne, I have a beef to pick with you." Stopped in my tracks, I hesitated and then said: "I think you mean bone."

During one of our agreed upon household weekly meals together, there came a rare pause in the conversation followed by an apology from the same housemate: "I wanted to say that I'm sorry for my erotic behavior lately." The silence around the table was deafening. Momentarily, flushed with embarrassment, she recanted: "I meant erratic."

Perhaps the most memorable of the mixed idioms came after we had all moved out, living on our own and in my case, another state. Our queen of idioms had purchased her own home and proudly welcomed friends often. On one particular occasion she greeted one by throwing open the front door and exclaiming: "Welcome to my humble commode!" The friend politely and sensitively responded that though he might use her commode at some point, he was looking forward to appreciating her very fine "abode."

It is true – there are limits in language as well as vulnerabilities. We all have had occasion I suspect to mix metaphors or botch idioms. Needless to say, my friend, bright and articulate, always recovered nicely and with good humor.

On the other hand, it has been said that language, seemingly innocuous and inconsequential, is in reality an area that reveals unconscious attitudes, prejudices, stereotypes and patterns of discriminatory thinking. Conversely, care in language is a first and necessary step in raising consciousness. More importantly, it is an effort at balance, which can even help educate us toward not only inclusion, but also equality.

It bears worth mentioning that at both the end of our Christian liturgical or calendar year (Pentecost, ending next week on November 26) and at the beginning, (Advent, December 3) we hear from two women the language of song. Today, Richard read for us the song of Hannah from the book of Samuel in the Hebrew Scriptures. On the 4th Sunday of Advent (Dec. 24) we will hear the song of Mary from the gospel of Luke. Both women sing of this conviction: *The empty will be made full; the poor will be made rich; the last will be first; the powerful brought down, the lowly lifted up.* We hear the voices of these women that have echoed down through the ages,

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symbolic of God's intervention and unexpected ways of working. Choosing to work through those marginalized and forgotten – and in the specific case of Hannah – through a woman anguished and childless. Yes, God chooses a woman as hero in a pivotal moment – equalizing an otherwise patriarchal culture at a time when women were treated as the lowest of low. It is through these narratives we witness our ancient scriptures emphasis on women as carrying forth the unfolding story of God's sustaining action in religious history.

During the last decades of the 20th century and now well into the 21st, the sound of women's voices has been heard in the field of theology. Active in ministry, theologically trained, (recent statistics show that 51% of students in divinity school or seminary are women) different in racial and cultural identity, deeply committed, women are making contributions that not only challenge any idea that would subordinate them but also surprisingly enrich the understanding and practice of faith. One of the major areas where women have labored is the absolutely central issue of the image and concept of the divine, the One who is source, sustaining and saving power, and goal of the world, whom we call God. The importance of this work can hardly be overestimated, for the symbol of God is the central organizing idea of the whole religious system. The way a faith community speaks about its God indicates what it considers the greatest good, the profoundest truth, and the most appealing beauty.

Consequently, language, with all of its limitations and complications, becomes a necessary and equally important, though not exclusive mechanism by which our faith and understanding of God is expressed, as well as potentially transformed.

One particular resource and scholar that I've found enormously helpful in thinking about the implications of language is Elizabeth A. Johnson, Distinguished Professor of Theology at Fordham University. She writes:

"As the history of religions make clear, God-language alone cannot bring about this transformation; female deities and the subordination of women have and still do coexist. But in the context of the social movement for women's equality and human dignity, which now reaches global proportions, speech about God has a unique potential for affecting change at a deep and lasting level. If God is "she" as well as "he," a new possibility can be envisioned of a way of living together that honors difference but allows women and men to share life in equal measure."

Consequently, Johnson asks:

"What is going on, for example, when women draw attention to long neglected biblical texts about Holy Wisdom, Sophia in Greek, a female figure of power and might? What is going on when women New Testament scholars remind us that in Luke's gospel, following Jesus' parable of the Good Shepherd who leaves 99 sheep to look for one that is lost, goes on to preach a parable with a female protagonist, a woman searching for her lost silver coin? Both parables depict the work of God the Redeemer, one in the

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imagery of male work, one in that of female work. The challenging questions here are but for all the churches and statues of the Good Shepherd, where are the churches dedicated to God the Good Homemaker? Where are the sermons that start, like St. Augustine did, "Holy Divinity has lost her money, and it is us!?" Why has this seeker of money that is very important to her not become a familiar image of the divine?

What is going on when scholars of medieval religious history shed light on women mystics and their articulation of their experience of God in female metaphors? To cite Julian of Norwich and her daring view of God's courtesy:"

As truly as God is our Father, so truly is God our mother. I understand three ways of contemplating motherhood in God. The first is the foundation of our nature's creation; the second is Christ's taking of our nature, where the motherhood of grace begins; the third is the motherhood at work in the Spirit. And by the same grace, everything is penetrated, in length and in breadth, in height and depth without end; and it is all one love.

So where does that leave us, an example of one faith community, Stanford University and Memorial Church, regarding, care, conscientiousness and thoughtfulness in our speech, our language, about God? What do we do with our differences, our views or belief that God is male or on the other hand, our struggles with the notion that we inherit a God-language that is cast almost exclusively in male imagery?

Elizabeth Johnson suggests that taking the full measure of these implications cannot be done apart from 3 ground rules that govern all speech about God.

The **first** and most basic is that the reality of God is a mystery beyond all imagining, literally incomprehensible. We can never wrap our minds completely around God and capture divinity in the net of our concepts. The history of theology is replete with this truth if we recall St. Augustine's insight that if we

have understood, then what we have understood is not God. Or theologian and scholar Sallie McFague's insistence that since all language about God is technically improper, we speak basically in models and parables. It is a matter, she says, of the livingness of God. Or Karl Rahner's image that we are a little island surrounded by a deep ocean.

The **second** ground rule: no expression for God can be taken literally. Whether explained by a theory of analogy, metaphor, or symbol, all human words about the divine proceed by way of indirection. We are always naming toward God, not defining God. To cite Sallie McFague again: our words and images are like a finger pointing at the moon, not the moon itself. They set off from fragments of goodness and beauty of this world and simply turn our face toward the source and goal of it all. If we see that our understanding of speech about God as indirect, it becomes clear that the critically negative function of analogy, metaphor and symbol be stringently applied to male images and concepts of God no less than other aspects of divine declaration. The designation "he" and the name "Father" are subject to all the limitations found in any words referring to God and in the end do not tell us all about God.

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The *third* ground rule is that there surely must be many names for God. If human beings were capable of expressing the fullness of God in one name, the proliferation of names, images and concepts observable throughout religious history would make no sense. Since no one alone is absolute or adequate, a positive revelry, a symphony, of symbols for the divine is needed to nourish the mind and the spirit. Theologian and scholar Paul Ricoeur has lucidly shown that in the Bible, for example, there is a polyphony of discourse –all radically non-metaphysical - by means of which the community interprets its religious experience. (personal relationships, human crafts and professions, domestic images, natural reality) Each of these forms of discourse – narrative, prophecy, command, wisdom writings, and hymns of celebration and lament – reflects different aspects relationship to holy mystery. God is thus intended by the convergence of all these partial discourses, and is yet still a reality that eludes them all.

Johnson contends that these 3 ground rules - the incomprehensibility of God, the indirect, nonliteral nature of religious language, and the necessity of many names for God are affirmed throughout Jewish, Christian and Islamic tradition and about which there is little dispute.

Regardless, within Christianity specifically, we inherit a God-language that is cast almost exclusively in male imagery, which has complicated things for us for many years, and still does. Using only male images of God to the exclusion of even female or more cosmic, limitless ones makes our God-language become rigid and indeed literal. In theological terms, this is nothing short of an idol, a graven image. This is not to say that the reality of male experience cannot be used to name God. Men too are creatures made in the image of God, redeemed, whose experiences also help illuminate the mystery of God. More importantly, recognizing the limitations of language, rather than seeing inclusive language for example as a perfunctory politically correct action, we see too that women are created in the image of God, and that God can be spoken of in female metaphors in ways similar to traditional male metaphors, without talk of feminine, cosmic or non-traditional dimensions reducing the impact of that imagery. One of the biggest misconceptions, for example, about inclusive language is that it involves a mere “spot cleaning” for male pronouns. Rather, the intent is to make the life, breadth and depth of God more accessible to more people, as opposed to eliminating all sexist language, which is simply not possible. More importantly, it is a re-imagining of God, not a replacement, which is seen by many scholars and theologians, men and women, as critical to the integrity of theology.

The truth is, even inclusive language has its limitations. Let me provide an example -- those who work on inclusive translations of the scripture will say that editing cannot and does not erase all of scripture’s language problems. “Efforts to change or remove sexist, classist or other inequitable terminologies as if they were simply thick gloss over an otherwise fair and just portrait – are overly hopeful endeavors” – wrote the editors of the Inclusive New Testament, published by Priests for Equality in Brentwood, Maryland. “Sometimes there is no clear picture underneath. Or worse: the picture is almost too clear, in its narrow, patriarchal view, so that many people can no longer see it as

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divinely inspired. Strip away the layers – the Jerusalem Bible, the American Standard, the Revised Standard – the translation we commonly use in our worship here – the King James – and go back to the original Greek where Paul writes “in his own hand,” and there he is, still talking about subjugating women. What do we do with that? Despise Paul? Leave the church? Rewrite the Bible?”

Regardless of who we are and where we fall on the spectrum of our background, opinions, traditions, gender, devotion, comfort, discomfort, theology or ideology, we would do well to take to heart the approach that scholar Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza describes and engage in a sort of critical discourse – letting the language, inclusive and otherwise - inspire the questions to which our faith will supply the answers. In other words, a truly theological understanding...does not reside in texts: it dwells among people. So the task becomes more a matter of overhauling theologies rather than tinkering with texts. The root of the attention of those who lovingly and conscientiously translate and offer inclusive translations of scripture, prayer, or hymns is founded in the heartfelt belief that Jesus as the Incarnate Word, came for all people; and that the mercy, power and grace of God works through – and even in spite of – our fallen human languages and our attempts to articulate that message over several thousand years.

Let me say finally, along with Elizabeth Johnson and many others, that this journey toward more just and liberating images and language about God is not without its dangers. Some fear that Christians in particular will lose their true heritage, which is intertwined with the name of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. I am fully aware of that and as someone who loves theology, is committed to the Christian faith, and holds the Trinitarian formula as sacred, I recognize that it is not a literal formula, nor was it ever intended to be the only way that Christians name God. This holy mystery of the living God transcends all images, but can be spoken about equally well and equally poorly in concepts taken from male or female, contemporary and indeed cosmic – reality. Far from being trendy, politically correct or post-modern, “we go forward with the conviction that only if God is named in a more complete way, only if the full reality of historical women of all races and classes, as well as that of men, enters into our God symbol, only then can the fixation on one image of God be broken. Not only then can women equally be empowered at our deepest core, but indeed all of us, as religious and civic communities transformed toward greater justice.” (Johnson)

I am deeply privileged, and find one of the greatest sources of my joy and passion in my work here to be what we do together each Sunday here in this beautiful chapel, inspired and imagined by a woman, Jane Stanford, way ahead of her time - who believed it should be a place that equally represented female and male imagery, noted in these stained glass windows that surround us - as well as welcomed all people to the greater depths of our understanding of God.

But even more importantly, I am reminded of the power of liturgy, which translates to mean the ‘work of the people.’ The order of service that you hold in your hands each Sunday during University Public Worship enables us to enter that work together and is a labor of love, care, conscientiousness and thoughtfulness, from organ voluntary, hymn, anthem and prayer selection, readings and sermon, to editing and production. For it is

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the means by which we at Stanford University and in Memorial Church speak about God. I believe we do so with integrity, sensitivity and responsibility.

Taking all the names, images and language together will not deliver a complete understanding of God. To borrow a metaphor from theologian Henri de Lubac: "Persons who seek to know God by compiling the names of God do not resemble misers amassing a heap of gold that can go on increasing until a rare purchase can be made. Rather, such persons are better compared to swimmers who can only keep afloat by moving, by cleaving a new wave at each stroke. They are forever brushing aside the representations that are continually reforming, knowing full well that these support them, but that if they were to rest for a single moment they would sink."

If you have understood, then what you have understood is not God.

As Hannah prayed: There is no Holy One like the Lord, no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God.

Notes:

Elizabeth A. Johnson; *Naming God She: The Theological Implications*; Princeton Seminary Bulletin.

The Inclusive New Testament; Priests For Equality; Brentwood Maryland; 1996.