

God is not a boy's name
St John's Harpenden July 31 2022

Text Hosea 11:1-11
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I have two props for today's sermon, the first being this mug which my mother gave me about 30 years ago: it says... "God is not a boy's name."

It was a great mug to have around the house when I was raising 3 little boys, because it started some good conversations. I don't know if they remember those talks about God, but I do. I don't know if they know they realised that they were being taught about God by a feminist theologian mother. It seems to me, for all sorts of reasons, that feminist theologians still need to be having conversations about who God is, about the nature of God. As women still struggle for basic human rights and as in some places women's rights are absolutely being eroded – I think here of the United States and Afghanistan, to name just two – I believe that we need a timely reminder that God is not a boy. Or a man or indeed, only our Father, though Tim preached about God our Father last week.

I often return, in my sermons, to two essential truths which are foundational for faith: *hesed*, or God's steadfast love, and grace. They are different but related.

Today's Old Testament passage beautifully illustrates both these dynamic and eternal truths about the nature of God: "I will love you with eternal cords that cannot be broken." This is God's steadfast love, a gift of grace that we neither earn nor deserve.

The prophet Hosea depicts God and God's relationship with humans in a variety of ways, at first as a husband in a marriage, and with some dubious ideas about the husband's behaviour. But in this passage, the prophet uses a different image to communicate his message. He gives us an image in which God is very clearly depicted as a woman, as a mother.

It is true that both mothers and fathers are tender towards their children, and either parent can swoop their beloved child up in their arms. But it is also true that in the particularly patriarchal society of the 8th c bc, in Israel, it would almost always be the mother or at least the nursemaid, who holds the toddling child's hand, who nurses and feeds the baby. "It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms ... I bend down to them and fed them."

I am old enough - you will be surprised to know - to be in a generation of women who had to fight for equality. In Virginia in 1974 a group of girls at my junior high school wanted to play basketball. The federal government had only just passed Title IX legislation which should have ensured equal

funding and resources for girls' sports, but the working out of the legislation had not yet trickled down to the Virginia Beach school system.

So... we girls sabotaged the boys' lockers (gum in the locks) and stole their basketballs and stormed their bus, we had sit ins on the gym courts ... and finally, after a couple of months of this, we got the funding we deserved. I will never forget the day that a huge box was delivered to the gymnasium, with new basketballs for our newly formed girls' team... and, even better, bright red converse all star basketball shoes. and I still have the red converse basketball shoes. We pranced, we danced, and we joyfully began to play basketball, the ever first year of girls' teams. [I also have a picture of this day... still up in my office!] I read in The Times newspaper that this same Title IX legislation had a significant impact on the development of women's football, including on women's teams in the UK! Well, I didn't become a famous basketball player, but just look at the England women's team now!

You may have heard that the personal is political and I would add, the personal and political is also theological. There is more often than not a direct connection between the fact that some people do think God is a boy, and the fact that they therefore consider women as less than, and treat us as such.

At about the same time that I was fighting for equality on the basketball court, I was also fighting for equality in church. I had to fight for the privilege of being an acolyte. Later, I watched as my mother fought for the right to be ordained and for her priesthood to be fully recognised. I participated in the M O W and Women in Theology when I moved to England... where it took another 20 years for women to be ordained. And now more than another 20 years later, there are still places in the Anglican Communion where women can not exercise their ministry, and the Church of England still ordains men who do not believe in the priesthood of women. If you need other examples of continuing injustices against women, you might talk to our Mothers' Union about the work of the MU to eliminate gender-based violence and abuse, and to promote equality

Because of ongoing battles for girls and women to be seen as equal, or indeed, just to be seen, at all, the fact that there are passages in the Bible where God is depicted in the feminine is very important - not just to me, but to many many women whose lives can seem only tangentially relevant to church and society.

This image of the feminine nature of God in Hosea is not an isolated one... just two other examples: **As a mother comforts her child, so I (God) will comfort you, says God, according**

to the prophet Isaiah. (Isaiah 66:13b) It is written in the book of Deuteronomy: You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you; you forgot the God who gave you birth. (Deut 32:18 NRSV)

From such images, I gain strength in a challenging time - and not just strength, but reassurance, affirmation that I am indeed created in the image of God. Politicians and male dominated political regimes and male dominated religious establishments may deny a girl or a woman her rights, but God never would and never has.

Each of us is created in the image of God, who, let me be clear, is not female but is also NOT MALE. We are so limited in our language when we talk about God but we must try not to limit God, and not to make God in our own image. We are made in God's image, not the other way around.

Language matters. Words matter. They have the power to raise us up and the power to hurt, power to exclude or to include and embrace. They have the power to heal. The language we use to define, explain, and identify God shapes our understanding of God. If we have an exclusively masculine view of God, we blind ourselves to other ways we might connect to God and understand God. We end up with a distorted, limited image of God. // God is not a boy's name.

Conversely, by broadening our God-language to include feminine imagery, we expand the ways in which we can connect to God; we enlarge our understanding of God*, our God who is compassionate and gracious.

The very first word God uses as a self-descriptor is *rakhum*: compassionate. God is meeting Moses on the mountain top, and Moses wants to know who he is dealing with.

“Yahweh, the Lord, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, overflowing with steadfast love and faithfulness.” [in Exodus 34:6-7].

The Hebrew word *rakhum*, meaning “compassionate,” is derived from the word for “womb.” The key to who God is, is rooted in the womb of God.

Compassionate and gracious. God feels compassion for God's own created people, and is moved by the emotion of compassion into action. Compassion motivates forgiveness, and deliverance.

Perhaps the most compassionate act of our loving God was to become incarnate, to physically embody compassion in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus is God's deep compassion embodied as a human being.

Jesus embraces the sick, cares for the outcast, and is deeply moved by human suffering. Jesus, travelling through all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness. ***Seeing the people, he felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd.*** Mt 9: 35 - 36

When a leper came to Jesus, beseeching him and falling on his knees before him, and saying, "If you are willing, you can make me clean," Jesus is moved with compassion, and stretches out his hand and touches the leper to heal him. Mk 1:40 - 41

As followers of Jesus who showed us what God's compassion looks like, we are called to live out the same kind of self-giving compassion. *St Paul puts it this way: **So as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you.*** Colossians 3 :12f

So ... to circle back to the beginning... God is not a boy's name. God is more than, bigger than, our language, more than we can imagine.* But at God's very core, from God's womb, we are blessed with an outpouring of God's compassion. Jesus embodied this compassion, and calls us to do the same.

Let us pray.

May God, whose compassion knows no bounds, God in whose image we are wonderfully made, strengthen us in challenging times. May our Mother God hold us close with bands of love, and may we show others what her love looks like in this fractured world. Amen.

*St Anselm: God is that which no greater can be imagined.

*Abigail Dolan <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/article/priscilla-papers-academic-journal/imagining-feminine-god-gendered-imagery-bible>

** https://d1bsmz3sdiplr.cloudfront.net/media/Study%20Notes/Compassion_Study%20Notes.pdf

Rakham and words related to its root are used 99 times in the Hebrew Bible – 80% of which refer to God.

And: "For if you return to the LORD, your brothers and your sons will find compassion before those who led them captive and will return to this land. For the LORD your God is gracious and compassionate, and will not turn his face away from you if you return to him. 2 Chronicles 30 : 9

For example, from Isaiah: Let the wicked forsake their way and the unrighteous ones their thoughts; And let them return to the LORD, And God will have compassion on them, our God will abundantly pardon. Isaiah 55 :7