

MOTHERING CHRIST

Easter 7 – Cycle C: Acts 16:16-34; John 17:20-26

There are three hymns in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* that are particularly appropriate for Mother's Day. We sing two of the three this morning: When Twilight Comes, our Hymn of the Day; and Mothering God, our Gathering Hymn. The third is the beloved Thanksgiving hymn, Now Thank We All Our God in which God's blessing of our life journey is described as beginning in "our mother's arms".

The other two hymns, though, address the motherhood of God, and in so doing, expand the frequent biblical references to God's masculinity to include the feminine. God, of course, is beyond gender, but living in a world in which most creatures, including humans, are either male or female, it is natural for us to project gender identity to God. In fact in any personal relationship we have, we use gender identification. We use gender identity for our pets: we don't refer to them as an "it". And our computers, phones, and GPS systems with interactive voice recognition quickly become "he" or "she" when we describe the conversations we have with them.

One of the unique teachings of Jesus was the idea of God as a loving parent. He called God "Father" and even "Abba", an Aramaic word which is probably best translated in English as "Daddy" or "Papa". In the prayer Jesus passes on to his disciples in the gospels, what tradition has called the Lord's Prayer, the address Jesus uses, "our Father", teaches believers the common *parenthood* of God. And so, because Jesus called God "Father," we signal our discipleship with Jesus by also calling God "Father". And praying the Lord's Prayer, either alone or as gathered disciples, establishes a piety among Christians of God as our common parent – God is "our Father". But praying the Lord's prayer also develops a piety among us concerning God's masculinity.

Christ Jesus was also male; and the Christology we are presented with in today's Gospel suggests the concomitance of Creator and Christ, of Father and Son. "Concomitance" is a \$10 word the church uses to say that both are in both: the Father is in the Son, and the Son is in the Father; the Creator is in Christ Jesus and Christ Jesus is in the Creator. It is a teaching unique to the Gospel of John, a teaching essential to the church's development of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. Among other things, though, it extends the notion of God's masculinity.

We cannot go far wrong, it seems, by using male terminology in referring to the Divine. And yet, our Hymn of the Day, in referring to a passage in both Matthew's and Luke's gospels, has Jesus portraying himself as a mother hen gathering together her chicks under her wing. The "chicks" in the reference are the people of Jerusalem, some of whom oppose Jesus' ministry and fear his popularity. Jesus' figure of himself as a mother hen is an image that acknowledges the power of a mother's love in overcoming sibling rivalry and conflict. The passage from the gospels is, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" (Luke 13:34). It is a gentle response to the harsh reception Jesus anticipates awaits him in Jerusalem as he enters it for the last time. But it also broadens our understanding of Jesus as someone who understands that love is the ultimate power in overcoming resistance in others; that love, and in this case a mother's love, is transformational. It correlates with Jesus' teaching that we should "love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us" (Matthew 5:44).

What is true about Jesus and about so much of what he teaches about God's concern to seek and to save the children of God, the people of this world, is that he understands God as and teaches God to be gentle and loving and forgiving. Jesus, himself, embodies the gentle, loving, and forgiving nature he attributes to God. These qualities are not exclusively feminine, but they are in stark contrast with the one incident in the gospels in which Jesus loses it – his turning over the tables of the money changers in the temple in Jerusalem. We cannot help seeing this scene as not fitting with the Jesus we know from the gospels. The violence we see in the temple does not fit with the rest of his proclamation; and I remember spending a good part of a seminary class on Matthew's gospel, some years ago, puzzling over the meaning of Jesus' rage.

The enduring record of Jesus' ministry, however, is a testimony of love and concern for the lost and alone; a passion for justice and peace; the practice of mercy and forgiveness.

There is a tenderness in his pastoral prayer, part of which is given in today's Gospel, that is undeniable. He prays that his disciples may see his glory; that they/we may never be separated from him; that we also might have concomitance. The prayer brims over with love and care: it is impossible not to feel the warm embrace he extends in these gentle words.

In today's reading from Acts, Paul and Silas, even though they are unjustly imprisoned, show a deeper concern for the wellbeing of their jailer than they have for their own freedom. As disciples of the Lord Jesus, they practise the sacrificial love that we identify so easily with Jesus and, quite frankly, from good and loving parents. And, as we see, good proceeds from their initiative. Before our very eyes, the jailer is transformed from someone for whom suicide was his only option to one who *received life* because love ruled the hearts and actions of Paul and Silas.

And so, it is not a great stretch for us to sing of a mothering God, a mothering Christ, or a mothering Spirit. The very things for which we give thanks today in our mothers or our adoptive mothers are the things we cherish in our relationship with the God revealed to us in the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. Carl Jung wrote of the co-existence of the masculine and feminine in each of us. In Jesus' proclamation of the God who is pure love, we see the same co-existence of what we identify as masculine and feminine. We give thanks today, not merely for the gift of good and loving mothers, we give thanks for the sacrificial love that is so powerful, so transformational in our world and in our personal experience. Jesus as a mother hen, receiving our sin and rebelliousness, gathering us to himself, and loving us into salvation. The mothering Christ who calls us to be mothering disciples in a world that forgets we are family.