

2019 06 16 – Dancing Spirit

John 16:12-15

Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31

About 25 years ago, after the difficult ending of an important relationship in my life, I started working with a therapist. At our first session I explained to her that I wanted to have a lit candle beside me during our time together. I told her that it was a Christ candle and, for me, it represented the comforting and healing presence of the Holy Spirit.

She smiled at me and said, “you’re checking out my theology, aren’t you?” That was long before I had started studying to become a minister and the word “theology” wasn’t really a part of my regular vocabulary. But I had to agree with her – I wanted to know if her understanding of God, her theology, was close to mine. I wanted to know if she was comfortable with the light of the Christ candle as a symbol or an image of God.

Whether we are religious, or non-religious, Christian or Jew or Muslim or atheist, we all have images of God that we carry with us. One of the first things that I do with each membership or confirmation class is I give them the opportunity to draw their own personal image of God. Don’t worry – I haven’t put crayons and paper in the pews this week; but I do want you to think about it. Think about how you see God. What image or word comes to mind when you think about or pray to God? (*wait for answers*)

There are many answers to this ancient question. People have been coming up with images for God ever since primitive man started drawing pictures on the walls of caves. Our understanding of the Holy Mystery is, of course, impacted by the time and the culture in which we live. The Bible, our source of much of our knowledge about God, was written in a patriarchal time and thus most of images in its pages are male, including the image of God the Father. As we heard in today's passage from the Gospel of John, when Jesus talked about God, he said "Abba" or "Daddy." He taught his disciples to pray to God saying, "Our Father [or Abba God], who art in heaven."

Father is a well-known and well-loved image for God. But even God as father can take many forms. What type of father are we referring to: an old man in a flowing beard or a young man at his prime of life; is this a loving nurturing every day dad or one who you only get to see on weekends? For some, who have experienced abuse at the hands of their biological father or step-father, this image of God may not be appropriate. There are no perfect images. I think that's why we need so many different options.

The amazing thing about today's passage from Proverbs is that this particular ancient scripture introduces a female face for God. It tells us that Wisdom was there when God created the heavens and the earth, that she "was the 'skilled artisan' standing next to the Almighty." Wisdom, or Sophia, as the Greeks called her, is often equated with the Spirit of God, the same spirit that was "brooding over the surface of the waters," in the creation story from the book of Genesis.

Some scholars would even argue that the Holy Spirit should always be understood as feminine. In today's gospel reading you heard Jesus talking to his disciples about the Spirit of Truth, and even Jesus called the Spirit "she." He said, "When the Spirit of truth comes, she will guide you into all truth." I will admit that not all translations use feminine pronouns in this particular passage, but it is exciting to think about God, the Spirit, as feminine.

Of course, God is not really feminine or masculine, male or female. As our Song of Faith says, "We witness to Holy Mystery that is Wholly Love." The Ground of our Being, the Holy Mystery is beyond our understanding, certainly beyond any single image that we might produce. But, as mere humans, we continue to project our meagre understanding of the universe onto God and thus come up with images that are both enlightening and limiting at the same time.

We are now in the season following Pentecost and at this time of year we traditionally speak of God as Spirit. In order to grasp the concept of the Holy Spirit, images such as wind and fire, breath and light are introduced. These are images that suggest a presence but not necessarily a form. As I said to my therapist over 25 years ago, these are the images of God that are the most meaningful for me. These are the images represented here at the front of our church with the Christ Candle and the Sacred Fire,

During our Community Learning Time today we also talked about the Dancing Spirit, the Spirit that guides us and moves with us throughout each day and throughout our lives. It is the Dancing Spirit, the Spirit of truth that Jesus was

describing to his friends. Jesus was speaking to his disciples on the night before he died, and he was trying to assure them that even when he was gone, they would not be alone. He told his followers that they would still have the Spirit of Truth to guide them. Jesus said, “the Spirit will take what is mine and reveal it to you.” He was letting them know that just as he had offered God’s wisdom to them, so they would also receive God’s truth directly from the Spirit.

The good news is that we also have the Spirit of truth, the Dancing Spirit, in our lives. And, like the disciples, we also have the life and the teachings of Jesus to use as our guide as we attempt to discern how the Spirit is calling us. As Christians, one of our key images of God is Jesus himself. Through the gospels, through Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, we have come to know and to understand the life and the teachings of Jesus. So, as Christians, it is important that we filter our understanding of God and the message of the Spirit through this teacher, this Jewish rabbi. When we use Jesus as our guide, then our images of God and our purpose in the world are more likely to reflect his message of love and peace and justice.

This Sunday is called Trinity Sunday. The Trinity is an understanding of God that tries to bring together three images (or persons) into one. It is traditionally: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. The early Christians took these three key images and created a triad, a trinity. It’s a wonderfully symmetrical image and we often see it portrayed in our buildings, our furniture and other art forms. It is an image that brings with it the concept of God as community, God as relationship, God as love.

But sometimes I think its symmetry is a little too neat, a little too perfect. In its perfection we may forget the mystery that is God. We may forget that any image of God is too limiting even one that is really three, even three that are really one. I'm not suggesting that we should ignore the Trinity altogether, in fact, I use this image every week in our benediction.

But I think it is important to ask ourselves what image of God works in this time and place? What image of God works for you and for me? What image of God brings you to a deep place of connection with the sacred? What image of God makes you want to jump up and dance with the Spirit?