

## WHAT NOT TO GIVE UP FOR LENT: OPENNESS

Sermon preached by The Rev. Dr. Barbara E. Davis  
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A month or so ago, I found myself lounging on the couch scrolling through various newspapers catching up on thought pieces. The leisure of the morning allowed me to read a little more widely and follow a few very satisfying media rabbit holes. At some point in this adventure, I stumbled across an article by Jessica Bennett about the use of personal pronouns in relation to the Presidential candidates. The article was titled, “She’s the Next President. Wait, Did You Read that Right?”<sup>1</sup> The article’s main question is, “Could something as simple as a pronoun reflect or even affect, the way voters understand power?” It was a fascinating piece describing how often people “cognitively stumbled” when they read a short paragraph about the next President that referred to the President using the personal pronoun, “she.” The next question, of course, is that question of electability that has been on a lot of minds in this campaign season. Could that linguistic dissonance over pronouns impact someone’s willingness to vote for a woman as President? Those of you who have been following the campaigns closely know that many of the female democratic candidates used the pronoun “she” when referring to the next President. Research does indicate that these linguistic issues matter, personally and organizationally, and many organizations and governments have moved to updating gendered terms, including utilizing the singular “they” as a gender-neutral pronoun and for those who identify their gender as non-binary.

This article got me to thinking more about something which I think about quite a bit, which is how do we talk and think about the pronouns that we use for God? I used to do an exercise with the confirmation class where I asked them to draw, as closely as they can render, their first image of what God looks like. Then to draw an image of how they imagine God looks at this stage in their faith journey. Inevitably, a majority of the “first images” of God is of the older white man in a robe with long flowing white hair and full white beard. That’s always my first image as well. But, as most of you know, or have heard me tell tales about, I have never been one to go smoothly along with I was told in church or church school. (Sorry Audrey 😊) I confess though, I didn’t think too much about God’s gender back in my childhood.

I wondered idly about why more women weren’t pastors, and secretly longed to be closer to that role, and was fortunate enough to see a woman pastor preach at my tiny home church in Westford, PA sometime in the 1980’s. She served a much larger congregation in the thriving metropolis of Meadville, PA, a population of about 15,000 people, which is why I’m sure this radical thing was allowed. You know how things are in big cities.

I was in college, studying religion, before I really got engaged in this question about God and gender. I was fortunate, one of my professors at Thiel College was a feminist scholar who brought into our classrooms a diverse amount of reading about the emerging field of feminist theology. I was twenty years old and reading theologians like Rosemary Radford Reuther, Phyllis Trible, Mary Daly, Judith Plaskow, Beverly Harrison, Elizabeth Schussler-Fiorenza, bell hooks, and Elaine Pagels. It was mind bogglingly fun and I sunk my teeth into all of it.

It wasn’t until I got to Union Theological Seminary, here in New York, that I really started thinking more about gendered pronouns and how and when to use them. Union was my first encounter with an inclusive language policy in paper writing, so I got used to using he/she and sometimes flirted with she/he in my papers. I dove into Biblical studies and learned that one of the major differences between the Revised Standard Version and the New Revised Standard Version is the broadening of more inclusive language from things like “brothers” to “brothers and sisters” and other compensations for what is described as a “deficiency in the English language – the lack of common gender third person singular

pronoun.”<sup>ii</sup> I was bothered that the NRSV had taken this step regarding people but had not done so in relation to gender pronouns for God. This struggle was amplified by the culture at Union, that beyond the inclusive language policy for papers, one did not dare, in that time, refer to God as “he.” I had more than one classmate embarrass themselves at Chapel by referring to God as “him” or “he” and being met with gasps of astonishment and frighteningly swift and persistent teasing.

To combat this potential humiliation and to make up for the NRSV editors not taking things far enough, I began to train myself to neutralize gender pronouns for God. I have several Bibles from that era with my notes as I worked through various options to equip myself to do this respectfully and smoothly with the Biblical texts. When I started working here, I began to hone my practice, especially during the midweek Wednesday evening services when we read a lot of Psalms, which lend themselves easily to this practice. On Sunday mornings, I was less consistent, until a number of years ago, falling pretty consistently into the pattern of removing these pronouns. A few questions emerged over the years, but what caught my ear was something that happened a few months ago. We had a particularly “he/him” oriented reading for the second lesson that I was reading. Without thinking much about it until I stepped up to the lectern and groaned inwardly a bit, in my earlier read through I hadn’t noticed *how many* male pronouns there were. But in this case, practice paid off, and I managed my way through the lesson speaking no male pronouns. It was the first time in all my years of reading scripture that way here that people at the door mentioned to me how much they appreciated that I avoided the male gender pronouns. All of these comments were from women. These were not questions, these were simple observational expressions of gratitude. But these grateful women got me to thinking.

One thing I thought about was how I make this neutralizing of God’s gender a practice, but I’ve never really talked with you all about that practice, except perhaps idly at Bible Study over the years. I thought about how this practice is not really staff-wide here, nor has it ever been. I heard Jon Walton on a few occasions refer to God as “she” and in general, the master of words that he was, he was careful with pronouns and being inclusive, as Bob always is, and Audrey, and Mark and Hannah Faye. I am not advocating that it needs to be a unified practice, it is more an observation on what is comfortable for us as a community. Whenever I stand up to read a passage, even like the one about lady wisdom that Dave read for us this morning, I wonder what you will hear, what is your vernacular? One would think that after twenty plus years, I would know your colloquial speech as well as anyone, and perhaps I do. Yet, every time I stand in front of you, I am making choices about how my vernacular meets yours. Every time I stand in front of you, I am also the girl who was in speech therapy in elementary school for my stutter. I am also the young woman who spoke familial over colloquial language and was teased lovingly but unmercifully for it. If I am really tired, you will hear me say “warsh” instead of “wash” even though it is a word I have practiced more than any other. I mention this aspect not to illicit your sympathy but to emphasize: *words matter*.

In these days, we know it especially to be true. I like how the poet Tony Hoagland puts it, “We use our vernaculars in the way that animals deploy various smells and glands: to tell others who we are and who we are with. Or, conversely, maybe we use it in the way chameleons use color: to blend in.”<sup>iii</sup> And perhaps that is how it is I with gender pronouns for God. Who are we with? What are the costs and benefits of blending in?

I thought about the idea that I could have years ago solved how I wanted to speak about God’s gender another way in my word choices. New Testament scholar Elaine Pagels describes those choices well in her analysis of how other early Christian texts describe God. She suggests that “Some maintain that the divine is to be considered masculo-feminine – the ‘great male-female power.’” Others insist that the terms are meant as metaphors –for in reality, the divine is *neither* masculine nor feminine. A third group suggests that one can describe the Source of all things in *either* masculine or feminine terms, depending on which aspect one intends to stress.”<sup>iv</sup> So, in terms of how to use these pronouns, there is both, neither, and either. But if post-modernity has taught us anything, it is that perhaps we don’t have to

choose one method for every occasion, and maybe we can embrace the variety that we each may need at any given time.

For instance, I love the King James Version of Psalm 23. The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures. *He...* One of my favorite hymns as a child was *This is My Father's World*, still love it. I love gender neutral language for God too because it makes me less lazy. I have to really imagine, who is this God I'm reading with right now? I like feminine imagery for God, because it challenges me to be open to God's abundant identity. God is *Like a mother hen gathering her chicks...* Jesus says. (Matthew 23:37-39 or Luke 13:34)

I also got to thinking about how questions of my youthful theological study are still swirling these days and shifting to consider not just the gender of God but also of Jesus. It was Rosemary Radford Ruether, who in her now classic book, *Sexism and God Talk*, in 1983 asked, "can a male savior save women?" This question may cause some eye-rolling even today, but in reality Ruether's argument is that Jesus' maleness has been given enormous theological importance within the history of Christianity, often being used to suggest that only men can represent Christ in the clergy. You might scoff and think that is only a Roman Catholic "problem" but in reality, the issues raised earlier about how women are seen in leadership are real issues even for those of us who are ordained clergy.

A new wave of theologians is challenging, *not* that Jesus was incarnate in male body, but that Christ can be seen to have a "multi-gendered body."<sup>v</sup> Interesting, right? In today's world we have more public discourse than ever before about gender as a social construct and a developing agility with language about binary gender terms and the fluidness of gender. In an article written ten years ago, New Testament scholar Candida Moss wrote about Jesus and the woman with the flow of blood that Audrey read for us today. Moss draws on Hellenistic ideas of the body which were sharply delineated – male bodies were understood as hard, sturdy, and unyielding. Female bodies were soft, porous, "leaky" as Moss puts it. She goes on to argue that in this passage from Luke's community, it is not only the woman's body that is conspicuously "leaky" but also Jesus' body.<sup>vi</sup> Sorry, for those of you who are squeamish. Jesus doesn't seem to control the power that "seeps" out of him to heal the woman, his leaky body mirroring her own and modeling that Jesus perhaps gives us more layers of gender diversity than we have been taught over the years.

There are more examples, but for today, on this International Women's Day, on this second Sunday in Lent, our challenge is how can we not give up the openness we need to receive this more gender diverse idea of the divine? Is it important to all of us or just some of us? With all the problems in the world today, this issue may seem like one that could be prioritized behind so many others. Yet I commend to your attention that it is vitally important. In my doctoral program at Fordham, we talked about the significance of linguistic resistance. Make no mistake, words make a difference. Furthermore, the operative question may be an echo of that phrase Jesus uses in the gospel of Matthew, does it matter to least of these? Indeed, yes. We are raising sons and daughters in this world, a world that desperately needs kind, thoughtful leaders, no matter what their gender.

In Friday's Wall Street Journal podcast, *The Journal*, my friend Kate Linebaugh laid out interesting new research that women not advancing in the workplace may have less to do with what's happening at home – the conventional reasoning – and more to do with happens in the workplace. It's well worth listening to ideas about why women earn a majority of college degrees and make up over half the workforce and yet less than 6% of women go on to become CEO's.<sup>vii</sup> That is not enough. It is not enough that there were six women candidates running for President in this campaign cycle, and none of those six remain. It is significant that there is still a "cognitive stumble" when we hear the word "she" attached to certain roles, especially roles that include power: our President, our CEO, our pastor, our God.

We are a congregation that strives to welcome woman in leadership in all aspects of our life together, so we must consider if our pronouns limit us. We are a congregation that strives to welcome

those in the transgender community and those who are non-binary, yet we always can improve our word choices, our hospitality, so we must consider if our pronoun choice - even for God, especially for God - limit us.

The openness we practice during this Lenten season is exercising that can make us more flexible. Like yoga or qi gong or running or singing or soccer practice, the practices of openness are not just about the *word* hospitality. Our practices of openness are about how we choose words that shape and reshape our own experiences of God, that in practicing we stop spiritually stumbling over a God who is too small for the church we are called to be. So, in this season of Lent, I invite you to join me in this practice of openness, to let God's abundant diversity, to let them - to let her, grow in our hearts and minds.

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<sup>i</sup> Bennett, Jessica. 2020. She's the Next President. Wait, Did You Read That Right? *The New York Times* January 24.

<sup>ii</sup> Metzler, Bruce. 1991. Introduction to the Reader. In *The Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. New York: Oxford University Press. p. xii.

<sup>iii</sup> Hoagland, Tony. 2019. The Art of Voice: Poetic Principles and Practice. New York: W.W. Norton & Company. P. 41.

<sup>iv</sup> Pagels, Elaine. 1979. What Became of God the Mother? In *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, ed. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow, 107-119. San Francisco: Harper and Row. p. 109.

<sup>v</sup> Wilson, Brittany E. 2016. Gender Disrupted: Jesus as a "Man" in the Fourfold Gospel. *Word and World* Volume 36, Number 1 (Winter), p. 25.

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid, p. 27.

<sup>vii</sup> The Journal (podcast) 2020. Why So Few CEOs Are Women. *The Wall Street Journal* March 6.