

This is another of those Sundays on which the calendar plays tricks on us. It’s Fathers’ Day, we’re two Sundays into a series on the nature of God, and this week our denomination, the United Church of Christ, begins the celebration of its 50th Anniversary as the General Synod meets in Hartford, CT. I guess that means we’ll have a three-point sermon.

Point one: Fathers’ Day. Sociologists tell us we are living in a “Post-Modern” world. And part of what this means is that there is a common assumption all around us, usually held with more conviction by those with more formal education, that there is no “givenness” to those institutions and constructs and ideas which former generations may have taken for granted. Certainly no God-given, God-ordained status to any institution or practice. People choose; people construct meaning and even reality. Whatever 51% of the people vote on becomes and defines what is moral and right.

Take the idea of “father,” for example. Until fairly recently, the collective wisdom of every religion I know of maintained that a responsible father was essential to the well-being and stability of a family and therefore to the stability of the society. Women generally don’t need to be reminded so much to love and to accept responsibility for their offspring—this connection seems to come with the package.

In the West, over the past century or so, has arisen the idea that the nuclear family is not and should not be the ultimate unit of society, of civilization, of well-being—that the State will and should supcede familial bonds and accept responsibility for children and those in need. [If there is no God-given social order; if a mother and father sacrificially committed to each other for the welfare of their children is not understood as part of any divine plan, then the idea of the Government accepting primary responsibility may be a reasonable backup plan.] Proponents of this development—that the State is primarily responsible—would maintain that they are not necessarily trying to render the office of fatherhood impotent, but are simply trying to assure that innocent children are not left at disadvantage. In any case, we live in an era in which there are aggressive legal and social and political campaigns to change the norms and the laws of what constitute family.

Whether the effect is intended or not, our current *status quo* more and more reinforces the idea that fathers are irrelevant, and that mothers, or mothers plus the State, are perfectly adequate and equal alternative family units. This is not a good recipe for encouraging men who have fathered a child to mature into the responsibility of accepting their very demanding role as fathers. (Young men seem to have trouble enough turning into responsible fathers even under the most supportive of social structures!)

Neither is it [to tell young men who have fathered a baby that their continued participation in the matter is not important] a good recipe for those single mothers whose lives and finances and options are statistically greatly minimized; nor, most importantly, is it a good recipe for the children who are raised in a home without a father. Every study I know of (research by Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, et al.) keeps underscoring that being raised in a home apart from their biological dad is the most hazardous situation for the children: (incidence for poverty; for educational, health, emotional and psychological problems; incidence of being abused by an adult, incidence of future criminal behavior,

future marriage stability, etc. The negative results are highest for children with absent fathers, according to data from the National Center for Fathering.)

By the way: single mothers struggling mightily, sacrificing daily for the welfare of your children, even continuing to speak highly of your children's father in front of them: God bless you! Divorced dads struggling, turning down out-of-state promotions, to remain meaningfully involved in the lives of your children and treating their mother with respect for the sake of your children: God bless you! Gay parents, lesbian parents, single adoptive parents, adoptive grandparents and everyone else striving to offer vulnerable children a stable and loving home: God bless you! The discouraging statistics which are true of children of absent fathers in general never determine the outcome of any one child, and the efforts of all concerned can make a huge difference.) Nonetheless, every study I have seen indicates the children who do best, statistically, are children raised in the home with their own mommy and their own daddy.

The results of our grand social experiment in this country begun in the 1960's are in, and the catastrophe keeps getting worse, and I keep wondering when the folks responsible for this experiment will decide it's time we admit it has been a disaster because of all the damaged lives. In the US, in 2006, an estimated 24.6 million kids (36.3 million) live absent from their biological dad, 17 million kids live with their single mothers, and in 26% of these cases the father lives out of state. The sad statistics go on and on, but mostly the social pressure seems to be increasing for the acceptance and normalizing of all sorts of alternative family arrangements. Dads are optional. (How many movies or TV shows have you watched which portray fathers as committed, benevolent, and worthy of respect? *Pursuit of Happiness* was one welcome exception.)

Fathers among us, and young men who will one day become fathers: what a terrific challenge for each one of us to take seriously and accept our God-ordained responsibility to continue to choose to love and to remain committed to and married to the mother of our children. What a terrific challenge for us to raise our sons to recognize the young women most of them will be dating and courting—in fact, that every young woman is a daughter of God, greatly beloved by God, created in the image of God, and therefore worthy of the highest respect. (Even though there's now a generation of women who have been trained to believe that they are equally entitled to the same sexual liberation and experimentation and the same share of pleasure they assume men have always been entitled to—how tragic that there's now also a generation of women very scarred and bruised, feeling very ripped off, very hurt and contemptuous and angry just beneath the surface. *Washington Post* journalist Laura Sessions Stepp has just published *Unhooked: How Young Women Pursue Sex, Delay Love, and Lose at Both*. She interviews young women and describes the ubiquitous “hookup culture” in which both young women and young men, determined to remain independent and free from hurt, engage in brief sexual encounters with partners they may hardly know—but guess what keeps happening? They end up heartbroken and disillusioned all the more. Is any of us surprised?)

Followers of Jesus have always been called to and held to a higher standard: standards of self-control and purity and integrity and honor. Standards of living as a royal prince, or princess: heir of the Most High. Imagine what the statistics for STDs would be like, what our public schools would be like, what our inner cities and our upscale suburbs and college campuses, what our churches and our own homes and our

own lives would be like if each of us honored the marriage vows we have freely entered into, or until then lived as Christ's own people, set aside as His royal possession. I hope we, His Church, know better than to join in the social experiment which has overtaken our land and wreaked havoc on so many marriages and children and teens.

Point two: This is not only Father's Day, but also a landmark anniversary of the founding of the UCC, which began to come about in 1957 when two former denominations (the Congregational Christian Church and the Evangelical and Reformed Church, both the result of prior mergers, voted to unite into one: hence the United Church of Christ. Many of you know this was a Congregationalist church before the UCC was voted into existence.)

Hundred of my pastoral colleagues and thousands of lay people will be assembling in Hartford this week, celebrating. I am not much interested. I served as an official delegate to two General Synods (what we call the gathering of the national church every two years) and that was quite enough. That many "true believers" in the UCC altogether in one place at one time make me nervous.

One thing about our UCC, as an institution: you can count on our leadership always to be on the progressive edge. There is much to be proud of within our church history. You may know the Congregationalists were the first to ordain a woman pastor, (Antoinette Brown, upstate New York, 1853: I don't think her congregation treated her very well, but in any case within a year she moved on to become a Unitarian.) Our forebears ordained the first Black man, Lemuel Haynes, to serve a non-Black congregation (1785). The Congregationalists were also instrumental in this country, following the example of William Wilberforce and the evangelical Church in England, in the long and noble struggle to end the institution of human slavery. In 1972 the UCC was the first denomination to ordain the first openly gay pastor, William Johnson. The leaders in the UCC are generally very committed to their vision for the church, and faithful to their particular understanding of what they believe Christ is calling them to do. (It is also true that our Congregationalist polity/church governance is intended to guarantee that no other person or entity governs the affairs of this or any member congregation, and there's a lot to be said for that mechanism.)

Point three: It also happens that one of the "hot-button" issues within our UCC has expressly to do with how we speak of the nature of God. Among most pastors and probably every Conference Minister, there is a mighty aversion against referring to God as "Father" or "He." (Even when I was in Seminary, where everything was up for grabs—I know I could have graduated from the GTU as a functioning agnostic, probably as a professing atheist—I could have been expelled for referring to God with a masculine pronoun. I have spoken with a good number of local church search committees in my time—to more than a few of them, failing to use "inclusive" language or incorrect grammar about God can be immediate grounds for terminating the interview. ("Inclusive" often includes everything but the traditional, so you may use all sorts of language for God except "He" or "Father". I am not making this up. All this in our liberal, inclusive, non-creedal denomination. Not that there's any resemblance, but it makes me wonder what would be the response of these committees if Jesus Himself showed up to interview to be their pastor, talking about His Father...never mind)

I believe the orthodox position of the UCC begins with the very sad reality that many, many women in our pews and in our communities have been deeply wounded and abused by men. Many have not enjoyed happy homes or families. So it is very off-putting and unsympathetic for me to refer to the “Father, Son and Holy Spirit” or to God as “He.” Since human families so often disappoint, there is little or no benefit to hold up God as “mutually respectful, reciprocally loving, united in purpose and mission, independent and interdependent,” God as Father and Son and Spirit since this image of divine family will only distance people from God.

Many progressive pastors believe all language for God is only metaphorical, and it is certainly true that any of our language for God falls far short of the Reality. The Scriptures use dozens and dozens of names and images for the Divine One (more than 30 in the Psalms alone: e.g. “Shepherd of Israel,” “The Most High,” “The Mighty One,” “Father of orphans, Protector of widows,” “The God of our Salvation,” etc.)

It is also true that God is Spirit; God has no gender. Have you ever worshiped in a UCC church which prays, “Our Mother who art in heaven, or at least Our “Mother/Father” who art in heaven—I have, or have tried to. What is acceptable and correct now in the UCC, as I understand it, is to refer to God with feminine pronouns or with no pronouns at all: “God exists eternally and sufficiently in Godself,” or “God Herself loves you” for example. You might guess that I find such language unnecessarily to distance us from God; I have never known anyone in trouble in the ICU to be comforted by such talk: “God Godself is with you.” The Christ did not become human, the Word incarnate, to reveal God to us in order for us now to refer to God as a neutered non-Person.

It is also true that I have experienced God to relate to me in ways both masculine and feminine. Sometimes bold and daring and challenging, sometimes patient and understanding and nurturing. God is more than male and female, but not less.

An underlying assumption behind these priorities in the liberal church—that God may be named in relevant, welcoming, therapeutic metaphors in addition to those familiar to us from the Scriptures but not as male—rests in the tenets of feminist theology and thought. It addresses what is understood as a long-standing and ubiquitous dominance by males which has oppressed females for millennia. This “Patriarchal” System has been so all-encompassing that the Scriptures themselves must be rescued from its grip; that even the prophets and spokespersons for God (presumably Jesus, also) were so conditioned by it and captive to it that everything which preceded this more enlightened generation or two must be re-interpreted to have validity or meaning for us.

But what about the Old Testament prophets? Did it never occur to them to refer to God or think of God in the feminine? As a matter of fact it did; in the last chapter of Isaiah, for example, the author employs similes for God (e.g. “as a mother comforts her child, so I [the LORD] will comfort you...” and speaks of God as midwife, also.) But they had good reason for not going down this path too far: they believed God had revealed Godself, and that some names were more pleasing to God than others, and some images are more accurate in representing God than others.

For centuries the people of God had observed what happened to their pagan neighbors: that goddess worship did not lead to a good and faithful end, and that the sons and daughters of Israel were set apart for something distinctive from the peoples surrounding them who worshiped gods and goddesses and idols. They knew of Isis, of

Astarte, of Ishtar, of Ashteroth (various names of the same fertility goddess.) Remember the worship under the groves, the worship of the feminine Asherim? Temples were sacked and false priests driven out and worse in order that worship of the true God might not be subsumed into the various forms of worship. There was a constant battle as the impulse to worship false idols all around them kept trying to overwhelm Israel.

The people of God even then must have known that when we worship false goddesses or gods, when we create idols, we cannot help but go further astray, for then we are actually worshiping elements or energies within ourselves rather than the One God above and beyond ourselves.

But more important, what of the persons of the New Testament? What of Paul? What of Jesus? Were they merely unwitting products of their patriarchal culture? Surely Paul knew about Diana/Artemis, about Aphrodite/Venus. Was he simply a pawn in the System? He could surely have written of the “Queen of Heaven,” or about God as “Rock, Cornerstone, and Temple” (to name one example from the PCUSA approved list of triune names for God.)

And Jesus? Had He never thought of the nature of God, never pondered this divine question? He never had an opinion of His own, but remained a hapless dupe in the hands of the System? Jesus? Please. Or maybe He was too cowardly to confront the religious leaders as to the error of their worldview? How insulting! He was not quite enlightened enough to tell us God is best named as our heavenly Mother? Jesus confronted and tried to correct many of the constructs of the Jewish faith He was born into, and was willing to go to the ultimate length—even to die on the cross—to try to help people understand about God. But He got this totally wrong, or backed down from just this one issue?

This is ridiculous, and I’m glad that you in this congregation recognize it. The significant element of our life of faith is not that we use approved vocabulary to broaden our appeal or God’s appeal. All the new images, including using similes of God as female (as Jesus did) may be useful on one condition: if they help bring ourselves and others into life-changing, renewing, healing relationship with “the God who is there.”

Do our images, our attempts in this generation to re-name God describe what Paul is describing in Galatians 4:1-8? Do they invite us more deeply into the relationship with the One who saves, who renews and regenerates us?

Here’s a paraphrase for what Paul is trying to say in our gospel lesson: We all started out (all of us, male and female, rich and poor, Jew and Gentile, American and Mexican) separated from God—as minors, in one sense, with respect to the law which holds you must become 21 years old to have your status changed. The Jews started out as heirs of the covenant promise of God—but until each of them turns 21, or until the date specified by the owner of the estate arrives, then even if you are the rightful son or daughter, you are no different in the eyes of the law from a slave. You can’t get at your inheritance until you turn 21!

Then, “in the fullness of time,” God sent God’s Son—to redeem women and men still under the power of the law, still separated, still, in this image, minors. The Son has come so that everyone might become an heir, so that everyone might be adopted by the Owner of the Estate, the Realm, the Fortune. In relationship to Jesus Christ the Son, everyone is invited into the new family; everyone enjoys the privileges of being the legal and spiritual heirs of the Most High. Now that Christ has come, each one has “turned

21.” And now that you have been adopted into God’s family, God has also sent the Holy Spirit to allow you, to grant you permission, to encourage you to cry out to God: “Abba! Daddy! Father!” An intimate, trusting connection.

This Abba is no earthly daddy, no abusive daddy—you all know this. In relationship to the God who is there, you are no longer a slave, an orphan, a survivor of abuse, a random being adrift in this very large universe. You are no longer a bundle of hurts or shame or sin; you are no longer a casual, unnoticed sufferer. Instead, in Christ, you are now an heir, a princess, a prince, entitled to inherit every good gift from God!

This is not about vocabulary, but about life-transforming relationship—especially for you who have been hurt, have been burned, have been ripped off at the hands of men. We can generate a million contemporary names for God, but if they do not lead us into this reality, as Paul’s image did for his hearers, they miss the point. The point is the radical change in self-perception, in identity freely offered to every child of God thru Christ Jesus. Not self-esteem, not positive self-talk, not therapeutic mumbo-jumbo.

Yesterday there was a couple being married just here. The bride looked radiant; she was a very bright, very confident and successful M.D. Sometimes I can’t help asking the bride (so that the groom will get the message, obviously): could your husband tell you or show you too often in the years to come, that he thinks you are beautiful, that he’s crazy about you, that you are more highly valued above all others in his eyes? I’ve never run into the bride who doesn’t think this would be a pretty good idea—to keep hearing, in word and deed, from her husband—that he loves her!

The Sovereign God of the universe is telling you no less than this in Christ: “I know you. I love you!” The Great Physician is wanting to heal your pains, your hurt, your brokenness. The Great Redeemer is ready to set you free from every bondage incurred in the past, from every habit which holds you back.

The good news is that this is too important to keep secret, to keep to ourselves. This is too important to treat with the logic of the UCC—to keep feminizing God, to keep feminizing the churches, presumably to become more and more user-friendly to women who have been damaged by dysfunctional families and immature men. This is a worthy goal—to take seriously the healing and maturing of our sisters in our churches and in our communities—but a backward way to go about it. For the last 49 years—that is, every one—the UCC has lost membership (from 2.3 million members to about 1.2 million these first 50 years.) The overarching vision has resulted in a much smaller, much more female membership. I love all of you magnificent women as much as the next guy—but where are all the men? Where are the young men? Where are the rugged men such as Peter and James and John, to choose three?

And how shall we teach the men to value and to respect and love the women if they are not interested in church, if they are not here? How, if they’re not interested in being taught how to be real men (you know, the kind Jesus has in mind—the kind who accept their responsibilities, who sacrifice, who lay down their lives for their wives and families, if necessary; the kind who yield their lives so completely to the living God that they mirror God’s heart and God’s will in all things.) How is it we serve the women if we drive away the men? That’s the part I don’t understand.

But what if we all, women and men, recommit ourselves to Christ’s own standard: to live out our lives together in genuine, costly love. To model healthy families, nurturing and safe for all. To live out our witness in His own family, His Church. What

if we fathers re-commit to spending time and guiding and teaching our own children first, but also the others in the church: to adopt and teach and mentor the children of others. To teach the boys we may influence to become men pleasing to God, to become honorable men faithful to our Lord Jesus.

He is the One who heals us all, who redeems us all, who loves us all.

Galatians 4:1-8

My point is this: heirs, as long as they are minors, are no better than slaves, though they are the owners of all the property; but they remain under guardians and trustees until the date set by the father.

So with us; while we were minors, we were enslaved to the elemental spirits of the world. But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!"

So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God. Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to beings that by nature are not gods. Now, however, that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly elemental spirits? How can you want to be enslaved to them again?