

[Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31](#)

[Romans 5:1-5](#)

[John 16:12-15](#)

Rev. Barbara Ballenger

St. Peter's, Glenside

Trinity Sunday, June 13, 2022

God's Pronouns

I still remember the Sunday morning more than 30 years ago when I met Lady Wisdom -- *Sophia*, in the Greek. It was probably in this reading from Proverbs -- one that had likely cycled through my life several times. But on this particular Sunday, as a young working woman sitting in the church pew, I heard it for the first time -- an alternative Creation Story in which a feminine figure labors alongside the Creator as a cherished master worker, one who is delightful and who delights in the children of earth as they enter the picture.

I was stunned. I never knew there had been a woman in the wings the whole time. But I soon found her in Proverbs, Psalms and the books of Sirach and the Wisdom of Solomon in the apocrypha. Lady Wisdom -- she creates, she builds, she feeds, she teaches, she draws the seeker deeper and deeper into life.

She has been called the very personality of God.

Lady Wisdom set me on a path to see my own feminine self, reflected back from the face of God. I was just getting pretty comfortable using that feminine language for God when I had to come face to face with ... the Trinity. As Don Maclean put it "the three men I admire most, Father, Son and Holy Ghost." And that Trinity with all its masculine pronouns was everywhere -- in our liturgy and theology, and art and poetry.

With theologian Sandra Schneiders I wanted to cry out: God is not two men and a bird! (And a male bird at that.)

The Trinity, as it is often explained to us on days like Trinity Sunday, is truly difficult to fathom. It takes some really hard-core philosophy to sort through the interrelatedness of three persons in one God. That early concept of three persons sounds like "three people" to our modern ears, and we've already talked about who gets to model for the portrait. And first, second and third, to our modern minds, sounds a bit like the winners on the Olympic dais -- a hierarchy, rather than the relationship of mutual self-giving it's intended to be.

It was tempting to set that whole Trinitarian metaphor for God aside -- as some theologians and some faith traditions have done -- in search of something that fit me better.

Except for one thing. I love the Trinity. Because I have profoundly and intimately experienced the divine in the three ways that we talk about God.

I have felt the presence of the creating force and the source of life all around me. In the One who Jesus called Father.

And I have committed my life to following the incarnate God, so real to me in broken people and broken communion bread in the One who the Father called My Beloved Son.

And I know the passion of a heart on fire both in myself and in others, and have belonged to faith communities animated by the One who responds to the cry: Come Holy Spirit!

It's important to remember that such personal and community experiences of the presence of God inspired the idea of Trinity in the first place.

In the early Church that gave us today's readings from The Book of Wisdom, and Paul's letter to the Romans and the Gospel of John, a people that fervently believed that God is One recognized that One God in the man Jesus. And then they experienced that One God in the Spirit that swept through their hearts and their houses. Even so, never once in the Christian Scriptures do they call that experience Trinity.

But our understanding of who God is doesn't end with the Scriptures. That's just one of the three legs that hold up the stool that is our Episcopal faith – the others being tradition and reason.

Tradition and reason gave us the theology of the Trinity, a short-hand code for what God is like. And because tradition and reason keep developing, we can find ourselves in a crisis of faith sometimes.

How do we reconcile our developing experience of God with the limiting paint and pronouns that we have always used to describe God? How do we get around two white men and a white bird?

My friends who are transgender or who experience gender much more fluidly than I do, have given me some imaginative space to consider those pronouns. I was taught and formed to live out of a very binary view of gender, with only two personal pronouns to work with – he or she. And those two pronouns have never been equal in value, still aren't, as we all know.

My friends who have broken out of that mold, and identify as "they" while maintaining their oneness and their wholeness, invite me into a whole new way of imagining people, and also of imagining God. It does not come easy to me, I confess, and my tongue stumbles as it learns new ways to honor who people are.

But that is the stumbling of discovery. God, who is mostly mystery, is constantly inviting us to discover more deeply who God is, who They are, despite the limits of our language.

Theologian Elizabeth Johnson has long invited us to consider new ways of talking about ancient truths. In her 1997 book "She Who Is: the Mystery of God in Feminist Discourse" she lists several formulas that modern theologians have developed to reconsider the trinity, looking beyond the binaries and the male dominance.

Here are a few that I find interesting:

- God as The Revealer, The Revealed and the Revealedness. (Karl Barth)
- God as Creator, Liberator and Advocate (Letty Russel)
- God as a brightness, a flashing forth, a fire. (Hildegard of Bingen – not modern but perhaps 10 centuries ahead of her time.)

These efforts hold on to what the church has long valued about the three-fold life of God: that it's entirely mutual and self-giving. That there is no decreasing value to the first, second, and third of God. That the relationships within God are more like a circle dance than a family hierarchy.

And we are invited to that dance.

This God that we call Trinity, is a God of relationship that makes room for us. We are invited into the dancing tent of God, into the life of God, into the action of God – which means that there are no hierarchies among us either when we enter life with God.

That sounds like good news to me and to anyone who has been told that they are of less value in the eyes of others and of God because of who they are.

When it comes to the Trinity, our greatest leap of imagination is probably not what the triune God looks like, but whether we can see ourselves as part of the picture that God invites us to enter—no matter what pronouns we use.

Amen

Sources:

"Trinity." In *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Theology*, edited by R. Kendall Soulen. *Oxford Biblical Studies Online*, <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/article/opr/t467/e228> (accessed 23-May-2016).

She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse by Elizabeth A. Johnson

Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God by Elizabeth A. Johnson.