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Third Sunday of Ordinary Time

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All Saints Church
Syracuse, NY

SERMON ON INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

In this parish, we try to be welcoming and inclusive of all. In an effort to extend this inclusivity to liturgical celebrations, Father Fred asked me to give a sermon on inclusive language at all the Masses. So here I am. Using Inclusive language is two-pronged, a double-edged sword. First it is the attempt to image God in ways other than masculine. It is also the effort to restore the voice of women, allowing them to speak in their own voices rather than having the masculine speak in their name. I thought a long time about how to introduce this subject, but last Wednesday evening, my students gave me the key. I teach a seminar in Religion and Imagination. We often discuss various images of God. The poem we read last week was the White Tiger.

The White Tiger

It was beautiful as God
must be beautiful; glacial
eyes that had looked on
violence and come to terms

with it; a body too huge
and majestic for the cage in which
it had been put, up
and down in the shadow

of its own bulk it went,
lifting, as it turned,
the crumpled flower of its face
to look into my own

face without seeing me. It was the colour of the moonlight
on snow and as quiet
as moonlight, but breathing

as you can imagine that
God breathes within the confines
Of our definition of him, agonizing
Over immensities that will not return.

R.S. Thomas

We don't want to say that women are totally excluded, so we say, Well, we know it means women, also. Women, themselves, sometimes say this, but that's what we've been taught: to think like a man. If we know that, why not include women outright. Women, also, image God. I don't want to get too off-track, here, but it is thi When I asked for comments, there were two apparently very different comments, but the two, taken together, set the theme for this sermon. Some students said, Yes, that is what we do, we cage God; others said it is impossible to cage God because, well, God is without limit, cannot be contained. The two are simultaneously true. Intellectually, we know that God is without limit, but it seems that both our church and ourselves try to control this immensity, this divine wildness, by deciding, definitively, who God is. And this is nearly always some form of the masculine. When I asked my students what their image of God was, they were reticent to reply. Then, I said: Well, whatever it is, I bet it is some form of the masculine. They shouted in response: Of course, that is what we have been taught all of our lives. And so the tiger paces back and forth in agony, in the cage that is too small for its immense body. We attempt to cage God. So what is inadequate about this way of speaking of the divine? It reduces God to the masculine and we begin to think of God as a man, perhaps like a superman, but certainly a man with male characteristics.

Culturally, we have caged women, also. Although culture is in transition, now, and everything that I say will have exceptions, what I say is still true for the most part. Women have been caged over the centuries by having men speak for them and in their name. We name this patriarchy. We have inherited the social pattern whereby the father of the family controls his wife, children and other less important men. At times, the father had the power of life and death. Even in benign situations where the patriarch was kind, the woman was still denied her own voice. This social pattern of the male being the most important was passed on in how we use language. I can remember my third grade teacher, when teaching about possessive pronouns such as his and hers, saying that when referring either male or female, the masculine was to be preferred. I was a good student. Imagine how many times I repeated that in my mind. The masculine is to be preferred; the masculine is to be preferred. On a test, you might be instructed to fill in the blank with the correct word: For example, the student will take out (his, her) book. Of course, "his" was the correct answer. (Regardless of whose book it was.)

You may think that example is insignificant, but it is indicative of a whole culture in which the feminine is understood to be included within the masculine. We encounter that when we sing

something like “He who has seen man has seen God.” That is an example of exclusive language. s pervasive patriarchal sexism that sees the masculine as imaging god in a way that women cannot, that limits ordination to men.

Along with patriarchy, exclusive language is reinforced by androcentrism which is viewing the most accomplished males of the species as the norm for the species. We see this many times in sports. Usually, males who play basketball are seen as superior to female players. Attendance at male games is much greater than that of females. Let’s think about the ideal human body. It may be a male body such as that of Michaelangelo’s *David*, certainly a marvelous work, or of the man created by God on the ceiling of the Sistine chapel. But even if the Venus de Milo comes to mind, it is the male conception of what the female body should be.

Enough examples. We can sum up these examples by saying that the cultural stories of patriarchy and androcentrism have shaped our imaginations so that we see and interpret experience through these lenses. It is time to change; it is time to restructure our imaginations, to see things in a new way, a way that opens the cage in which we have tried to tame God by describing the divine mystery only as male. It is time to restore women to the place they held in the story of Genesis 1. God created human beings in God’s own image. In God’s image God created them. Male and female God created them. In this story, the creation of male and female was simultaneous, and they stood together, equally, before God.

If we really wanted to branch out, we could say. The source of all that is, created human beings in the divine image; in the mysterious image of God, humans were created. Male and female God created them.

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