

So, today begins our August sermon series!

We have finished with our series on faithful people in the Bible, and we're beginning a new one.

This 4-week series is based on topics and questions, which you all asked me to preach about.

These Sundays are sort of, congregational choice, if you will.

I will be out of town next week, but Kate Byers will also preach on a requested topic.

You can see the rest of the schedule in today's bulletin.

So, today's topic stemmed from an ongoing email exchange I have been having with a parishioner, and he asked me, "Is God male, female, or both?"

Some of you may know that I have an opinion on this sort of thing.

I promise this person was not a plant; I didn't manipulate someone into asking me so that I could preach on one of my favorite topics, gender.

He just happened to ask because he was curious, and so here we are.

Now, upon hearing the question, “Is God male, female or neither,” you might expect me to stand up here and preach about what I think God’s gender is, but I am not going to do that.

The reason I won’t preach on that directly is because I don’t think God’s gender is actually the point of controversy.

You see, God created humans, so God existed before the concept of male and female, man and woman.

So God must be something wholly other.

I don’t think it’s too controversial to say that God is beyond gender.

God is not a man, nor is God a woman.

God is not male, nor is God female.

After all, the text we heard this morning tells us that God created male and female in God’s image, so there you go, God is neither, but maybe has characteristics of both?

The more contentious issue, I think, is not what God’s gender is, but how we refer to God.

You see, language is quite limiting, and it doesn’t have the capacity to explain the expansiveness of God, even if we could conceive of it.

But one part of the limitations of language is that our grammar structure limits us in such a way that we refer to people as he/him or she/hers.

This is an ongoing issue for folks who don't identify as male or female because they want a pronoun, which is gender-neutral.

More and more people are using the pronouns they and theirs in the singular form as a gender-neutral alternative.

But back to God, the problem is not what God's gender is, I think the issue is, what do we call God?

What words do we use to describe God?

Historically, in the Jewish and Christian traditions, God has been referred to as a he, him, his and father.

God has been conceptualized as male.

The scripture we heard this morning did this as well.

It the text, God said, "... 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness... So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.'" (Genesis 1: 26-27)

So all is well and good, male and female are created in the image of God, but then, God created humankind in *his* image, in the image of God, *he* created them.

That seems a little contradictory to me.

But Hebrew is a gendered language, meaning that all nouns and verbs are masculine or feminine.

Since the Hebrew verb, “to create” is the masculine form of the verb, so it’s translated, “he created.”

And then, the Hebrew word for “in his own image,” is masculine, so that’s why it’s translated as his.

But then you have the issue of the plural, right, because God said, let *us* make humankind in *our* image.

So maybe God has multiple forms, say, I don’t know, like the trinity.

Speaking of the trinity, many scholars and theologians have come to understand the Holy Spirit as the feminine manifestation of God.

After all, the English word Holy Spirit is translated from the Greek work, *sophia*, which is a feminine noun.

So maybe God is multiple forms, both male and female and beyond.

The problem, which we need to stick with, is language.

For centuries, Christians have exclusively referred to God in male terms.

Everything from our hymns, to our prayers, to our sermons, to our creeds, to the Catechism of the Catholic Church,

*which says, "We ought therefore to recall that God transcends the human distinction between the sexes. He is neither man nor woman: he is God. He also transcends human fatherhood and motherhood, although he is their origin and standard: no one is father as God is Father." (No. 239).*

So, God transcends the sexes, God is neither man nor woman, neither father nor mother, and yet, we (Christians at large) continue to refer to God as male, and as he, and as father.

The issue at hand is that language has power.

When you say the words he, him, his, father, etc., you have an association to the male person, the male being.

You cannot divorce those words from the associations you make because that connection has been reinforced throughout your whole life.

It's not realistic to use the male pronouns for God, but constantly remind yourself, "I know I said he and him, but God isn't male, God isn't father, God is beyond gender."

Doing those mental gymnastics is exhausting and nearly impossible.

Years ago, it was the custom to refer to all children as he/him/his, and it was customary to refer to all of humanity as mankind.

But women got fed up with this, because we didn't hear ourselves included in the masculine pronoun or the word mankind.

And if you think women were just overreacting, we could try an experiment where all children are referred to as she/her/hers and see how that makes men and boys feel.

My point is that neither male nor female are the default, and neither should be treated as such.

Unfortunately, by referring to God in exclusively male terms for millennia, we have linked maleness and God.

The good news is that the linking isn't inextricable.

We have to get rid of the gender role that we have assigned to God.

You see, humans have created gender roles for both genders.

There are roles that women are supposed to play, and roles that men are supposed to play.

These roles are defined by specific emotions and behaviors.

You might not know that you have been taught to play a role, but you have been taught in a myriad of ways throughout your whole life.

I know I am painting with a broad brush, but men are taught to be stoic, strong, independent, assertive, financially successful, ambitious, and competitive.

This is the hyper-masculine man.

Women are taught to be compromising, accommodating, sensitive, emotional, nurturing, collaborative, domestic, passive.

This is the hyper-feminine woman.

Now, I know that I took both of these to the extreme, but it is true that men are expected to manifest the masculine characteristics that I mentioned, to some extent, and women are expected to manifest the feminine characteristics that I mentioned, to some extent.

The good thing about these gender roles, is that all these characteristics have benefits to them.

There are advantages to having any of the traits that I mentioned above.

The bad thing is that we are expected to only demonstrate certain characteristics, according to our gender, and if you cross too far into the other gender role, there can be social repercussions.

I think we have created a problem for ourselves by dividing up these qualities along gendered lines.

We should take all of them, put them in a melting pot, not associate them with any gender, and then people would be free to express whichever qualities feel most authentic to them.

Now, I promise this little sidebar does have to do with the gender of God.

Since we can't separate these characteristics from their gender associations, (as much as I would like us to), when we continue to refer to God as male, what we are doing is layering those masculine characteristics onto our understanding of God.

If God is the ultimate male, the ultimate father figure, then God is powerful, demanding, assertive, stoic, strong, ambitious, competitive, and a disciplinarian.

Now, you might say, "I don't think of God that way!"



Well, this is the archetype that we have created in our society, and so when we refer to God in fatherly and masculine terms, this is the subliminal message that we are conveying.

Now, some of you might be saying to yourselves, “Actually, I *do* think of God that way, so what’s the problem?”

The problem is that not all of us do.

And to use language, which is exclusively male limits our ability to conceptualize God in different ways.

Since God is beyond gender, God is beyond the gender roles, which we created, by the way, they are not divinely ordained.

So, you might think of God as being strong, stoic, powerful, etc., but someone else might think of God as being nurturing, forgiving, collaborative, sensitive, maybe even maternal.

But if we only use male pronouns to describe God, then there’s no room in our language for people who think of God in any other way.

And it’s an injustice for folks who don’t conceive of God in male terms to have to mentally translate every time they hear God referred to in the masculine.

So the solution might then be to alternate between male and female pronouns, sometimes referring to God as he, and sometimes as she, sometimes as father, sometimes as mother.

But there's another problem!

Some people don't conceptualize masculine or a feminine God, some people don't think of God in parental terms at all!

Some people don't even think of God in human terms, for example, lots of folks use nature imagery to describe God.

So, now what to do?

My solution is that I don't refer to God as male or female, he or she.

I try to use words like God, Creator, Holy One, the Divine, and so forth, words, which are broad enough to encompass all the ways in which we relate to and understand God.

That way, people can layer their understanding of God onto the words that I use.

I know it might be cumbersome to refer to God without using pronouns, but I have been doing it for years, and you get used to it.

In fact, I have a Bible here called The Inclusive Bible, published by a group of Catholic Priests called Priests for Equality.

They figured out how to write the whole Bible without using gendered pronouns for God, so it is possible.

Not easy, but possible, and I think, important.

After all, “Humankind was created as God’s reflection; in the divine image God created them; female and male, God made them.” (Genesis 1:27, The Inclusive Bible, pg. 5).

Amen.