

# SERMONS FROM ST. FRANCIS

**Second Sunday after Pentecost**

**June 16, 2006**

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One of my spiritual mentors was a Roman Catholic Sister of Mercy, Sr. Jean Roche. As chaplain of St. Peter's Hospice in Albany, New York, she was charged with introducing a group of us volunteers-in-training to the spiritual component of hospice care.

She was a good teacher and an excellent storyteller. This Father's Day I am reminded of a story she told about her own experience with a terminally ill patient:

It had been a good visit. Sr. Jean had listened compassionately and the patient had opened her heart about many things. The two women had prayed together, and, as they were both Christians, Sr. Jean proposed that they say the Lord's Prayer.

She began, "Our Father, who art in heaven..."

"No!" cried the woman. "I can't! I'm sorry, Sister. I just *can't* pray those words."

Sr. Jean was surprised by the woman's reaction. Nonetheless, she left off praying and attended to her companion. *What was wrong?* In this intimate moment of prayer, the patient's painful story tumbled out. When she was a vulnerable child, her father had treated her so cruelly and abusively that the very word, "father" was repulsive to her, triggering, as it did, a flood of painful memories and emotions.

I remember that I found Sr. Jean's story to be shocking and heartbreaking. Shocking because I had lived my life in blissful ignorance of the abuse that many youngsters receive at the hands of their fathers, mothers, and other so-called "caregivers".

Heartbreaking because, through no fault of her own, this woman had been deprived of the consolation and spiritual gifts of the prayer which Jesus himself taught to his disciples when they asked him, "How, then, shall we pray?"

For me, this was the beginning of a great learning --about child abuse, which is endemic in our culture and around the world; about how language is colored by our life experience; and about how the language of the Christian tradition can inadvertently hurt when its intent is to heal, and how it can be, and has been, co-opted by people who use it to exploit and to perpetuate violence against others.

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Unlike Sr. Jean's patient, I had a kind and loving father as well as a kind and loving mother. Our parents taught my sisters and me to pray; took us to church; and

embodied the patient, steadfast love, the compassionate discipline, and the boundless forgiveness that they taught us was characteristic of God.

My father was Mary to my mother's Martha. He was the one more likely to talk about God; to lead us in prayer; or to engage a visiting member of the clergy in theological debate. Mom, on the other hand, was one who expressed her faith in deeds, including countless acts of everyday love and service to her family, neighbors, and colleagues.

When we became old enough to realize that someday our parents would die, we were told that God, who -- *incredibly!* -- loves us so much more than our parents possibly could, would always be with us.

Eventually I came to the stark realization that the one whom Jesus -- and we -- called "Our Father" was really not my human father -- or my mother, for that matter. While my parents had shared their faith, now it was time for my faith to mature as my own faith. I came to understand God as the one revealed in and by Jesus: "God in three persons, blessed Trinity."

As a budding feminist, it was apparent to me that the One who "made them male and female" was neither, as sex was a property of creatures, not of the creator. When some people insisted that priests must be men because Jesus was a man and resisted the ordination of women, my retort was that God was forced to send a son because, in this sexist world, no one ever listened when God sent a daughter!

This, my sisters and brothers, is all by way of telling you that I have never been uncomfortable with the image of God the Father, in good part because I have positive associations with both parenthood and fatherhood and in good part because I never was taught and I never believed that God values males over females.

Having said this, let me assure you I am well aware that my experience is not everyone's experience.

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Words do more than denote -- they evoke emotional responses that vary from one person to another. Among Christians today, perhaps no word evokes a greater variety of responses than the word "Father" when it is applied to God.

One bad move that Christians have historically made is to confuse the reality of human fatherhood -- with all the sin and failure and limitation that it entails, even among the kindest and most faithful of men -- with the image of divine fatherhood. Ignoring Jesus' injunction to "call no one your father on earth...[because] you have one Father -- the one in heaven," Christians have all too often used the fact that Jesus called God *Father* as an occasion to project the characteristics of male human beings onto God.

Worse, in patriarchal cultures -- those that privilege men over women and children; the strong over the weak; the light-skinned over the dark-skinned; and the heterosexual white man over everybody else -- many Christians have projected the structure of their own hierarchical societies upon creation. According to their supposedly literal reading of Holy Scripture, God is male, and "he" created a world in which women, children, animals, and nature are all subject to men. It is claimed that these so-called "literal" readings justify not only the submission and abuse of women, children, and the natural world, but the enslavement of non-white persons; the demonization of sexual minority persons; and the persecution of non-Christians.

There is no clear line from the image of the one whom Jesus called Father to this worldview in which injustice and violence are a matter of divinely sanctioned course. In modern times, however, many Christians have abandoned the imagery of the Triune God -- Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They have equated the One whom Jesus called Father with both the creator and with the Old Testament God. In so doing, they have not only separated the Son and the Holy Spirit from their role in creation, to which scripture and the Christian tradition both testify, but they have created a hierarchy of persons within God. According to this view, based on a prejudiced selection of the myriad images of God afforded by both the Old and New Testaments, an angry, violent, and jealous God requires the blood sacrifice of his subservient son.

No longer is God simply male; no longer is God simply a bad father -- "He" is the worst Father imaginable. And if he is divine, he sanctions the most unspeakable of horrors.

No wonder some Christians today want to abolish male imagery entirely when talking about God. We Christians have used this imagery recklessly to excuse and justify our sins, not to serve the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

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My question this Father's Day is twofold: Is it possible to rehabilitate God the Father, and is there any reason to do so?

Looking at the second question first, two reasons come to mind immediately.

First, if we avoid or eliminate the Father imagery in the New Testament, we lose a great deal of the sense of the narrative. For example, it was not unusual for people of the ancient near east to call their king God's son. When we moderns hear Jesus calling God, *Father* we think of his intimacy with God, and, perhaps, that he is telling us he is divine. To the ears of Jesus' contemporaries, this language likely had political overtones as well. The passion narrative tells us that Jesus was accused of claiming that he is the King of the Jews. Some scholars believe that at least some of Jesus' disciples expected him to exercise political leadership. If we skip over the language of God the Father, neither of

these claims makes much sense.

Early Christian thinkers grappled with the relationship of Jesus to the one whom he called *Father*. In this relationship they saw not the designation of a human king but, rather, the incarnation of God. The Christian God is one who became human -- who lived and died as a human being. This God did not sit impassively in heaven while someone else was born among the Jewish people, grew up, conducted a ministry, died on the cross, was resurrected, and ascended to heaven. *God did these things Godself and God did them in the person of Jesus Christ.*

The incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of God in Jesus Christ constitute the central mystery of the Christian faith. It is with *this* mystery that our faith begins -- and the One whom Jesus called *Father* is an important part of the story of this mystery.

Significantly, the story of God in Jesus Christ stands patriarchy -- and monarchy, for that matter -- on its head. This is the second reason we might choose to rehabilitate God the Father. God the Father is not the detached head of household who has wife, servants, and children at his beck and call. No-- he is rather the one who makes himself vulnerable and, indeed, sacrifices himself for the salvation of his beloved children.

Likewise, as today's Gospel lesson informs us, God the sovereign is one whose kingdom is not built violently upon the labor of conscripted soldiers and slaves who spend themselves that the King may be exalted, but is one whose kingdom grows in harmony with the natural world and with humanity. It is one in which the honest work of women and men is to labor to harvest the abundant life this truly benevolent sovereign has prepared for all.

When we are faithful to the Biblical narrative and we do not project our own human notions of fatherhood and patriarchal social organization upon it, we see that the word "Father" is used not primarily as a symbol of raw power, but as a symbol of love. Scripture tells us, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son," and "In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins."

I believe it is possible to rehabilitate God the Father. Rather than project our sinful, human ideas of fatherhood upon God, it behooves us to consider the true nature of the one whom Jesus called Father, and to aspire to That One's nature in our own fathering, mothering, and in all ways caring for the vulnerable among us -- to begin with love and acceptance; to proceed with a sincere interest in the well being of the other, with self-sacrifice, and with forgiveness; and to enjoy abundant life in intimate relationship.

Finally, while I find the idea of God being literally male or female to be untrue, I think it is a good thing to thoughtfully use a variety of language and imagery -- including, but

not restricted to, gendered language -- when discussing the all-encompassing majesty, vitality, power, and mystery of the Divine.

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I return to the story of Sr. Jean and the dying woman who was unable to address God as *Father*, and I read it as a story of hope. In a world in which many people have turned their backs on the church and turned away from God because we have all too often allowed God to be portrayed as a powerful, vindictive male, a sick woman confronted her chaplain: "Sister, I just *can't* pray those words."

In that moment, however, neither woman turned away from God. They both simply realized that it would be wrong to call a loving God by a name that represents painful rejection, violence, and the absence of love.

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I pray God's blessing upon all you fathers, grandfathers, stepfathers, fathers-in-law, and godfathers this morning, as well as upon you many nurturing males with whom God has so richly blessed our community. Happy Father's Day!

Amen.

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