

You probably already know this but in case you don't, there are two creation stories in the bible. One is in chapter 1 and one is in chapter 2. Chapter 2 is probably the more familiar one of the two. It talks about Adam being made first and out of clay and Eve being made second and out of Adam's rib. However, today's reading comes from chapter 1 and the wording leaves us with more questions than answers. Listen to this wording: "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."

So, in this very first creation story of scripture we hear a plurality in God that might make us uncomfortable—for example, when it says "us" and "our." We also hear that God is both male AND female because it says: "in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." You might say, yes, but it says "he" so it must be male. However, we have to remember that this was originally written in Hebrew and the word used was Elohim, which is both a masculine and plural word in Hebrew. It has nothing to do with God being male but the word being male. In other words, we could translate it to say, "God" instead of "he" and that would not be an incorrect translation.

So, today's text invites us to see a fuller image of God. We are to see God as bigger than one, which I imagine is the Trinity, and we are invited to image God as bigger than one gender.

Being a priest, I've studied scripture for a long time, and like probably all of you, I already know that God is bigger than one gender. However, I still use masculine pronouns when referring to God and I still sometimes picture a Santa Claus like man when I say my prayers. I think that's because I grew up in a time when people weren't paying attention to how important images are when shaping belief. No priest when I was growing up used "God" instead of "he" and no priest ever included Sarah or Rebecca or Rachel in the liturgy next to their husband's names. I grew up in a very male centric church with male centric ideology. Which, by the way, was fine with me. I happen to like men and the men in my church valued women immensely so I never felt like I didn't belong.

But I realized that my comfort in the church wasn't shared when I became a school chaplain. Many of the young girls I teach bring up uneasiness with the way women are treated in the bible. I once told them that King David was God's most beloved king and they all became enraged. I was so taken aback by their response because, you know, it's King David. So I asked them to tell me what was going on for them when I told them David was beloved and they said, "he was a womanizer! He forced Bathsheba to be with him, killed her husband, and then made her his wife! And what about poor Saul's daughter? She helped him and loved him and he never says anything about her after he meets Bathsheba!" Truly, they were hurt that God would favor such a man.

I began to pay closer attention to how these girls were responding emotionally to scripture. They are so far removed from an overtly patriarchal society, that they can't even imagine a God that would condone much of the bible. As it turns out, many of the boys were having a hard time believing the scripture because it's so different from their world too. One boy even went as far as to say that we needed to throw it all out and start over because "too much has happened since then."

My students were having trouble trusting God because the images I was providing for them were not big enough for their world. More than that, my students were having a hard time believing. One of my students wrote this in her final religion essay:

"When I was younger, I could never understand God's purpose or reasoning, so I started to have many doubts. After having some hard times in my life, my doubts in God got worse, and I ended up not believing in him at all. Recently, my mom brought me to see a movie called 'The Shack'. This movie completely changed my way on seeing God... In the movie, they portrayed God as a woman. It occurred to me then that the main reason I wasn't really comfortable with God is because I pictured him as an old man, which wasn't necessarily comforting. Since watching that movie, my faith has improved because I now have a soothing image of God... I learned that God is always present, but most of the time it feels like she's not there, even though I know she is. I learned that God never physically interacts with humans, but she can work her way into our lives through simple things."

For this young lady to learn about God from a movie after being in my class for 3 years was a huge wake up call. Because I know better... for the bible tells me so. And even if my own male images of God work for me and they have worked for the church for thousands of years, that doesn't mean they work for everybody. In fact, having only one predominant image causes damage, as I have learned through teaching young people.

On this Trinity Sunday, I think it is important that we examine how we image God. To begin, we can start with our very first introduction to God in today's scripture. Let's look again at that word, "Elohim" used in the original text of today's reading. The fact that it is, at it's root, plural, means that the word for "God" encompasses more than one "thing" but it still doesn't mean "God's." That's kind of a beautiful feature of the Hebrew language and we don't have the equivalent in English so we have always translated that as "he" and therefore missed the greatness that is God in our language. God is more than one without being divided and God is more than male and female without being a hermaphrodite.

So, our images of God as a shepherd, God as a father, and even God as Jesus aren't complete. They are true but they are not complete. Trinity Sunday is about remembering that God is not just a personification of love and God is not just a man who came once to tell us some things and then left. God is alive and all around us. Barbara Brown Taylor once said: "Jesus was not killed by atheism and anarchy. He

was brought down by law and order allied with religion, which is always a deadly mix. Beware those who claim to know the mind of God and who are prepared... to make others conform. Beware those who cannot tell God's will from their own."

I think she was right except the first time I read it; I thought she was talking about those other people out there who are bad. Now, I know that she was talking about my own ego. Yes, beware of that which claim to know the mind of God and are prepared to make others conform for the sake of order. Sometimes, the self needs order and clarity in order to feel safe. But today's gospel reminds us that safety was never the goal. Jesus commands his disciples to go out and make disciples of all nations. At that time, that was akin to a suicide mission. In fact, all of the disciples, except for John, died violently as martyrs. Jesus didn't promise them safety, he said, "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

So our task today is to identify what our need for order and safety might be keeping us from seeing. What damage might we be doing to our community and ourselves by limiting our own images of God? More accurately, what beauty are we failing to surround ourselves with for fear that the beauty will be too big and swallow us up?

Because as Barbara Brown Taylor points out, "Earth is so thick with divine possibility that it is a wonder we can walk anywhere without cracking our shins on altars."