

## Does God have feet?

summer meditation 09 August 2020 Julianne Zimmerman

### **Genesis 1:26, 27, NRSV**

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."

So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

### **Romans 10:12**

For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him.

### **Galatians 3:28**

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

### **Colossians 3:11**

In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!

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Years ago I saw a Dana Carvey standup performance in which Dana told a story about how his toddler melted his heart by asking, "Does God have feet?"

The anecdote is adorable, in part because it so innocently and eloquently punctures millennia of human tendency to caricature God as a white-haired, white-skinned, white-robed old man on a cloud throne — remote, kindly, stern, or angry, depending on the depiction. Someone or something easily categorized, contained, controlled, claimed, dismissed. Just as we do to each other.

Unfathomable, incomprehensible God defies this impulse at every turn: we ask, who are you? where are you? what is your name? what do you look like? God replies, **I am**.

This same God who will not consent to being categorized created humankind in God's image. **I am** is the infinite original of whom we are all mysteriously and wondrously finite and fragmentary yet whole reflections.

I'm delighted that we've undertaken a congregation-wide conversation about how we can better perceive and honor God's likeness expressed in our glorious variety of human manifestations. Over the past several weeks we've specifically been talking about the constructs America has created and perpetuated to define and codify human beings by race and caste, in hope of recovering from these constructs and becoming the *beloved community*.

These deeply rooted constructs of division and distinction, gradations of worth, are antithetical, vehemently opposed, violently antagonistic to the divine presence of God within and around us.

Our inherited cultural norms defy and defile the indivisible and yet utterly unique soul that is an expression of God's self and the ineffable essence of this phenomenon we call life. The pathology of *otherness* infects every aspect of our social, professional, financial, governing, cultural, and other interactions. Perhaps worst of all, as Ibram X. Kendi confessed in such tender detail in *How to Be An Antiracist*, we are so deeply acculturated to systems of categorization and hierarchy that it can be hard work to even notice the violence we routinely inflict on each other and on our own souls.

We are a loving, welcoming, serving congregation, open and affirming. But we cannot become the beloved community until we are able to recognize and celebrate all of our finite, particular selves as equally divine expressions of God's infinite self. And so, following in the example of first-century Christians, we are striving to dislodge the logs from our eyes.

I've been meditating about this a lot in context of the God-defying constructs we call race and caste, and also in context of the equally God-denying constructs we call gender.

I've been meditating especially about how our insistence on categorizing humankind into race and gender categories with assigned attributes and relative worth is a collective and individual sin against God. And I've come to think that it is especially blasphemous that we assign those degrading attributes to God.

In Genesis we start off okay. We come to verse 1:26 where the creation story introduces people. *Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."*

[I've spoken about dominion in a prior summer sermon, so I'll leave that aside here.]

First let's note that God does not assign rank among the created humans — *let them have dominion* is not *let half of them have dominion*, or *let a few of them have dominion*, and definitely not *let a subset of them have dominion over the rest*.

Second it's curious that God is not assigned a gender until God creates people. Suddenly God becomes definitively male, even as God creates people who are male and female. Genesis 1:26 says *Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness*. Then Genesis 1:27 says *So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them*.

Do you feel the jarring shift? It's not just a transition from the divine first person to the human third person, or a narrative shuffle between present tense of creation and past tense of narrative retelling. It's a reframing from God's perspective to post-Eden human perspective.

Perhaps you might object that this is simply an artifact of English defaulting to male, which is certainly what I was taught. Let's consider that non-answer. Why does the English language have a default gender? And then also consider that this default gender conceptualization is not an artifact of English but common across many human languages and cultural traditions. Again, that non-answer is merely an observation, not an explanation. Why should there be a default gender? Does God have a gender?

*So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.*

I think this verse embodies the lengths to which we will go to frame a narrow conception of God and each other. The sentence construction exhibits a kind of schizophrenia, cramming conflicting ideas together in a statement that barely holds the contradiction.

It is telling that the trouble begins in the very moment when God *embodies* images of Godself.

We latch our focus onto the bodies. Not on the mystery of our existence as images of God, the infinitely creative source and author of life. We immediately become fascinated, obsessed with the naming and categorization of these physical bodies, male and female, and redefining God in relation to them. Categories. Distinctions. Hierarchies. Power dynamics. Lineages. Birthrights.

I have come to think that humankind's fall from grace in the Garden of Eden may not have been the act of defying God's interdiction on the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

I think it was an avalanche of sins that began there but immediately propagated: having discovered that they could disobey God, and that there was such a thing as evil, Adam and Eve immediately located their guilt and shame in their bodies, and subsequently set about self-justification and blame. Status-seeking. Othering.

We treat the expulsion from Eden narrative as though the sequence of events was inevitable. But each of those steps was a choice away from God, against God, the sum of which rendered the first humans incompatible with Eden.

Can we imagine a different course of events, in which instead of hiding, lying, and attempting to erase their disgrace and horror by shifting it onto someone else, Eve and Adam instead immediately sought out God to ask forgiveness, healing from their shame, and a restoration of their ability to perceive God and each other without self-justification, recrimination, separation, or otherness?

Can we imagine a human story in which we recognized from the beginning — or from any point in time since — that we are all reflections of God, and that all together we collectively represent the merest glimpse of all God is?

If God has feet, God has more kinds of feet than we have ever observed or imagined feet could be. If God has gender, God has greater dimensionality of gender than we can conceive.

Whatever we think of as gender — like whatever we think of as race — is the barest sketch of the myriad ways in which God's infinitude can be expressed in flesh.

In the excerpts of his letters we hear this morning, Paul struggled to find language to exhort the early churches in Rome, Galatia, and Colossae to adopt this awareness, to see each other as holy and undivided. Not the same. Not drained of uniqueness or stripped of individuality. Not indistinguishable. Not colorblind. Not homogeneous. Not separate. And absolutely, categorically not a hegemonic hierarchy.

Paul urged them to embrace a vastly richer and more beautiful calling: a kaleidoscopic community of all description and without distinction. Paul encouraged these early Christians and every generation since, us included, to live into being the glorious embodiment of Christ by loving each other without rank or categorization, praising God for our differences, and honoring the ways in which those differences express the richness of God's indwelling.

Recall that Paul came to his ministry because Jesus forcibly interrupted his religious campaign and spoke directly to him: “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” After being blessed, healed, and shown gracious and courageous hospitality by some of the very people he had set out to kill or imprison, Saul — newly Christened Paul — became a loving brother and faithful correspondent to people he had previously condemned as offenders against the faith. Having recognized Christ in them, he was freed to serve and spread Christ’s call.

Can we also embrace that call? Can we stop persecuting God within us?

What would it look like if we as a church were to fully dispense with differentiation and categorization and jubilantly celebrate our variety — God’s variety — untainted by sinful constructs of caste or status or preconceptions about gender norms?

How would it change our faith and our worship if we were to repent of thinking of God as male, female, or binary? What if we used all gender pronouns for God — or stopped using *any* gender pronouns to talk about and to God?

How would it rehabilitate our relationship to God if we asked God to heal us like our brother Saul of our constructs of hierarchy and supremacy? Could we relinquish our crippling default male, heteronormative preconceptions and habits? Could we recover from the malignant insanity of the construct of whiteness? Could we allow the scales to fall from our eyes?

How would it reframe our perception of ourselves and our kindred human souls near and far if we were to shed millennia of othering and recognize that all souls are one holy soul — God’s soul — and all colors and genders are sacred likenesses of God?

How would it quicken our souls and our humanity to picture God not as a white patriarch, or even as Morgan Freeman (although I confess I find him much more appealing), but as a young Latina? An Indigenous two-spirit person? A Southeast Asian ladyboy? A senior citizen who has suffered decades of trauma inflicted by well-meaning parents and doctors who thought that gender-assignment surgery was the in the best interest of an intersex baby? A homeless teen, rejected by their parents and unsafe in the world because their nonconforming gender identity or sexuality is considered shameful? A prepubescent girl subjected to FGM? A gay man tortured for the crime of homosexuality? A transgender murder victim? A survivor of sex trafficking? A refugee fleeing gangs, mass rape, secular or religious oppression, or domestic abuse? An asexual person who is existentially negated by a rigorously gendered and sexualized society? A person of any gender at all, including not identifying with a gender? The person you see in the mirror, at ease in your race and gender identities or not? All of the above, plus everyone else who has ever lived, is alive now, or will live in the future?

God is all of these and infinitely more. God created and is creating humankind in God’s image. God exists in each person who ever was, is, or will be. All fall short of God, but all exist in God, thanks be to God.

Christ admits no *other*, no caste, no supremacy. Our persistent failure to live into that knowledge may be humankind’s oldest and deepest sin, and the greatest failing of Christ’s church.

May we be the generation to accept the enlivening of the Holy Spirit and finally repent of that sin.

And so, my siblings, I beg you to forgive me for committing violence against you in word, deed, or silence. And I thank you for your courageous hospitality as I seek to clear my eyes and soul.

All-encompassing God, forgive me. Help me to repent from persecuting you, and heal me of my sin against you. Cause me to truly know and inhabit your likeness in me. Train my soul to love and honor you in my human siblings, and to be joyfully united in your infinite and holy variety without constructs, without hierarchies, without castes, on earth as it is in heaven.

Amen.