

CHRIST THE WISDOM OF GOD

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Douglas Clark on May 22, 2016 – Trinity Sunday
First Congregational Church of Haddam – Higganum Congregational Church*

Hebrew Bible Reading – Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31 (CEB – Common English Bible)

Doesn't Wisdom cry out
and Understanding shout?
Atop the heights along the path,
at the crossroads she takes her stand.
By the gate before the city,
at the entrances she shouts:
“I cry out to you, people;
my voice goes out to all of humanity.
The LORD created me at the beginning of his way,
before his deeds long in the past.
I was formed in ancient times,
at the beginning, before the earth was.
When there were no watery depths, I was brought forth,
when there were no springs flowing with water.
Before the mountains were settled,
before the hills, I was brought forth;
before God made the earth and the fields
or the first of the dry land.
I was there when he established the heavens,
when he marked out the horizon on the deep sea,
when he thickened the clouds above,
when he secured the fountains of the deep,
when he set a limit for the sea,
so the water couldn't go beyond his command,
when he marked out the earth's foundations.
I was beside him as a master of crafts.
I was having fun,
smiling before him all the time,
frolicking with his inhabited earth
and delighting in the human race.”

Christian Testament Reading – I Corinthians 1:22-24 (CEB)

Jews ask for signs, and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, which is a scandal to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. But to those who are called—both Jews and Greeks—Christ is God's power and God's wisdom.



Andrei Rublev, *The Trinity* (Fifteenth Century Russian Icon)

Today is May 22. Today is notable for at least two reasons. It's Golf Sunday at First Congregational Church. Steve Bull, in his typically persuasive way, has recruited me to play in a foursome. God help the other three golfers in my foursome—I haven't held, much less swung, a golf club in years upon years. Steve has also exhorted me to preach a short sermon today. So here goes.

The second reason why today is notable is that it's Trinity Sunday in the Christian liturgical calendar. Every Sunday we sing to the Trinity in the Gloria Patri and the Doxology: Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. But during the rest of the week, when we're caught up in the joys and sorrows of everyday living, we probably don't pray or meditate on the relevance of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity for this life that's lent to us.

A long time ago, about 1,600 years ago, a Christian theologian “complained that it was impossible to go into the marketplace to buy bread, or go to the bank [or any other public place], without getting involved in a [lively debate] about whether God the Son is equal to or less than God the Father.”¹

This morning I'd like to stimulate a lively debate about a different aspect of the Trinity: Because we have been taught to understand God as Father, does this mean that God is exclusively male? Or is it true, in the words of Julian of Norwich, that as surely as God is our Father, God is also our Mother?

My short answer to this second question is, Yes. As surely as God is our Father, God is also our Mother. We have to remember, in our God-talk, that all language about God is metaphorical, analogical, symbolic. In the words of poet and hymnwriter Brian Wren, we “bring many names” to our experience and understanding of who God is.

We also have to remember that words may fail us when we try to describe how God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit are related to one another. The earliest Christians, those who followed Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem, who were witnesses to his life, death, and resurrection, understood Jesus as Son of God. They never questioned or doubted his humanity; and so they used the very human language of Father and Son to analogically articulate the relationship between Jesus and God. They also witnessed that whenever Jesus prayed, he prayed to his Father; and he taught his followers to pray as a community to “Our Father.”

A later generation of Christians, those who had not directly witnessed Jesus in his full humanity, used what we call incarnational language to point to the relationship between Jesus and God: Jesus was the Word of God become flesh. “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth,” affirms the Gospel of John. Because Jesus was a male human being, and because the Greek word “logos” has masculine gender, it seemed natural to use only male language when referring to God.

The problem with using exclusively male language about God is that it can exclude half the human race: namely the female half. Recent theologians and poets and pastors have begun to explore female imagery for God—at least in part because of the increasing presence of women in the ministry and in the academy. And we have rediscovered an important resource in the biblical witness for imaging God as female: the understanding of God as “Wisdom,” or “Sophia” in Greek: a word that not only is feminine in gender, but also appears in biblical texts as Woman Wisdom.

1 Catherine Mowry LaCugna, “The Practical Trinity,” *The Christian Century*, 109 no 22 Jul 15 - 22 1992, p 678-682.

Consider this morning's reading from the Hebrew Bible Book of Proverbs: Woman Wisdom says of herself: "I was formed in ancient times, at the beginning, before the earth was." Woman Wisdom in the Bible of Jesus is, we may say, a personification of God: Woman Wisdom is a significant way in which God reveals herself.

Consider Paul's affirmation that Christ is both the power and the wisdom of God. So it's possible, and prophetic, to speak of Jesus not only as Son of God and Word of God, but also as Wisdom of God. So here's a trinitarian way of understanding Jesus' relationship to God: Jesus is Son of God, Word of God, and Wisdom of God.

In the words of theologian Elizabeth Johnson, "Jesus as Sophia incarnate includes all in the call to be friends of God and can be represented by any human being called in Sophia's Spirit, women as well as men. The combination Jesus Christ/Sophia leads to a healthy blend of female and male imagery that empowers everyone, and works beautifully to symbolize the one God who is neither male nor female, but creator of both, delighter in both, savior of both, and imaged by both together."²

Imagine if you will going to the grocery store tomorrow and using the language of Woman Wisdom to talk with your fellow shoppers about God. Imagine if you will going to the bank tomorrow and using the language of Woman Wisdom to talk with the teller about Jesus. Imagine if you will being on the golf course this afternoon and using the language of Woman Wisdom to talk with your fellow golfers about the Holy Spirit. Imagine if you will that as surely as God is our Father, God is also our Mother.³

2 Elizabeth A. Johnson, "Jesus, the Wisdom of God: A Biblical Basis for Non-androcentric Christology," *Ephemerides theologicae Lovanienses*, 61 no 4 Dec 1985, p 261-294. [Other articles consulted, but not cited: Julianna Claassens, "Commentary on Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31," http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2858; Mary Catherine Hilbert, "The Mystery of Persons in Communion: The Trinitarian Theology of Catherine Mowry LaCugna," https://wordandworld.luthersem.edu/content/pdfs/18-3_Trinity/18-3_Hilbert.pdf.]

3 Cf. e.g. <http://zzapp.com/anthems/lyrics/As%20Truly%20As%20God%20Is%20Our%20Father.xhtml>.