

“Mother Spirit”

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Pentecost, Year A, Revised Common Lectionary

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Readings

Acts 2:1-21; Psalm 104:24-35b; 1 Corinthians 12:3b-13; John 7:37-39

Marcus Borg, a contemporary American theologian, has popularized among theological liberals the understanding that anything we say about God is necessarily metaphorical. In living tension with that understanding is my own dialogue with it, that I need more than metaphor to comprehend what God wants for me to do and to be. In fact, all language is metaphor, but there is a truth behind the language that belies it – I don’t know the term – *metaphoricality*?

What I know is what I have experienced in knowing the Spirit of God: enlightenment, peace, purposefulness, even fulfillment. And that is not answered by the intellectuality of metaphor. There is a shared point, at which theology becomes comprehensible and it goes too far, both at the same time. You may find that we have reached that point, this Mothers Day.

You will undoubtedly hear me express it to the children many more times than once, that the Holy Spirit is our Mother. We are born from the waters of baptism to live a life in the Spirit, not to be bound by the restrictions that these fleshly bodies and our earthy world attempt to lay upon us. We are more than we appear to be.

There are those detractors who would claim that our Mother does not exist, that in fact our mother is the earth. And I would reply that we are parts of the earth and that all together the other component parts of the earth and we must function as a whole. I might even say that the earth has been our mother, but like other biological mothers, once our adoptive Mother has taken us to her bosom, our biological mother has no say over us. We only understand that we owe her life; we are obligated to tend this world together, for it is our heritage and the assurance that there will be future generations. But we are more like siblings now than like parent and child.

Some who believe as we do would claim that by virtue of our rebirth in the Spirit, we are now in the earth but not of it. We are some kind of resident alien encampment. That’s all very romantic, but not very practical, and it hardly seems inviting to others who might want to get a taste of what we are like and to join our merry, spiritual band. What sort of continuing obligation to our planet and the others aboard it does being *in* and not *of* encourage?

No, like any open adoption, we know our mothers. And we have not been treating our biological mother very well, perhaps as a result of marked respect for our spiritual one, perhaps because now we consider our spiritual selves to be superior to our earthly selves. Have we, at least by the implication of our acts, presumed that the Spirit who created the earth will be able to regenerate it as well? Any adopted person will tell you that attempting to deny your biological parents will only result finally in denying yourself. You may have truer parents in your adoptive ones, but heredity will play itself out, also.

Now, it may seem unduly radical to you that I would refer to God as our Mother, especially God in the Spirit but (truly) God in all three Persons of the Trinity. Other Christian ministers will refer ceaselessly to God as our Father, praying “Father God” this and “Father God” that. Jesus, as you know, called God “Abba,” which is the Aramean equivalent of “Papa” or “Daddy.” This may be a radical way of considering one’s relationship with the Godhead, but it is only somewhat the same as calling God “Father,” isn’t it?

Jesus stressed the radical relationship that we have with God, which then compels us to be respectful of God’s desires, intents, and plans for us, and therefore obedient to God’s commandments. You get a little of that with “Father,” but an unretreatably great amount of it by calling God, “Papa.”

I am not sure I would be able to convince any of you to begin calling God “Papa,” so this

morning – just as an exercise – I am going to invite you to refer to God today (at least in your hearts) as Mother. For it is God who has given birth to us each individually in the Spirit, God who has adopted us, wet-nursed us in our spiritual childhoods, and God who has given birth as well to the Church. God is our Mother.

Understanding that truth can lead us more deeply into faithfulness and guide us to understand ever more, God's call upon us.

What She wants for us is evident from how She acts on our behalf. We Trinitarians say that God is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Those activities alone offer a pretty full prescription of what God expects: *Our Mother wants us to feel whole and complete and settled and purposeful. And if we cannot find that in our earthly environment, then She wants us to find it in our spiritual selves, that part of us that makes us so very like her, and then to get to work on our earthly environment so no one else feels similarly at sea.*

*She doesn't want **us only** to be whole and complete and settled and purposeful. She wants us to make that possible for others, too. It will be our obligation as sisters and brothers to see to it that our Mother's wishes are fulfilled.*

Hence, Paul's focus on the gifts of the Spirit enumerated in the epistle reading for today: "to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." Wisdom, knowledge, faith, the ability to heal, miracles, speaking truth to power, discerning the spirit of a moment, the ability to make oneself understood in different languages, the ability to interpret accurately what other people are saying; these are the ineffable kinds of things that Paul associated with the Spirit-grounding of a community in Christ. Paul noted that Christ is known to us only by the Spirit, now, and so we should establish our own renown in spiritual ways.

Marcus Borg has identified Jesus as a Spirit-person who invited all human beings to become Spirit-persons with him, liberated from the constraints of this existence in order to live in the Spirit with him. And so we may, but this will not take us away from our obligations to our biological family.

So we have to promote proper ecological behavior.

We have to promote physical and mental well-being (which are actually the same thing), and sustain ourselves spiritually to that end... stretching ourselves, not only in our physical maintenance, but spiritually, challenging our souls and rejuvenating them.

If we are Spirit persons like Christ was, then we have to be embody the Spirit, to give God flesh and bones. Our religion is not just some set of theorems, it is not a moral code. It is, at its heart, a relationship: each of us with God who returns us into relationship with one another and with the earth.

We will have to make use of the gifts and graces instilled in us, by virtue of us being the Spirit's children.

We will have to respect others, to make of ourselves an inviting community and one in which others will feel welcome, nurtured, respected – respect not being the political correctness given so much questionable press lately, but politeness and even deference.

And this draws me back into the matter of language. The notion of referring to God as Papa, as Mother. I will admit that I have an agenda with this: Our Godtalk deserves to be equally sexualized, in order to avoid saying that God has no gender or that God is beyond gender but that God encompasses and embraces gender, thus assuring everyone that all people are acceptable as members of God's family. Practicing the use of inclusive language when speaking of God is important for empowering those who have been marginalized, because they will find themselves included as well. We need to blow some people's minds with the knowledge that God is Jesus' Mother as well as Father, and is our Father but certainly our Mother, too.

Here we are, at that theological junction I mentioned at the beginning of this talk: both right where we need to be in order to be able to say anything reasonable about God and where we

have gone too far for language to do justice to what we have come to know in our hearts.

But our direction is clear. As children of the Spirit, we become the body of the spiritual Christ, giving God hands and feet and tongues, to make palpable in the world that very Spirit of whom we speak, to renew the earth of which we are so undeniably parts because of the renewal we have found within ourselves.

Happy Mothers Day.