

## Scripture Readings:

### Isaiah 66: 10-14

<sup>10</sup>Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her, all you who love her; rejoice with her in joy, all you who mourn over her— <sup>11</sup>that you may nurse and be satisfied from her consoling breast; that you may drink deeply with delight from her glorious bosom. <sup>12</sup>For thus says the LORD: I will extend prosperity to her like a river, and the wealth of the nations like an overflowing stream; and you shall nurse and be carried on her arm, and dandled on her knees. <sup>13</sup>As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem. <sup>14</sup>You shall see, and your heart shall rejoice; your bodies shall flourish like the grass; and it shall be known that the hand of the LORD is with his servants, and his indignation is against his enemies.

### **John 20: 15-17**

<sup>15</sup>Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." <sup>16</sup>Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). <sup>17</sup>Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

### **Romans 8: 12-17**

<sup>12</sup>Therefore, brothers, we have an obligation—but it is not to the sinful nature, to live according to it. <sup>13</sup>For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, <sup>14</sup>because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. <sup>15</sup>For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." <sup>16</sup>The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. <sup>17</sup>Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

### Sermon Text:

If you’ve ever gone looking for a Father’s Day card, the same question may have occurred to you: what is the connection between fatherhood and ducks? I mean you have your cards with sailboats and with golf clubs, but if your father, like mine, is neither into golf nor sailing, then you are left with the ducks. Handsome mallards sitting among bull rushes, or ducks in flight over autumn leaves. How has the duck become the symbol of masculinity? What is it saying? – that duck hunting with dad is one of those essential experiences all children are supposed to have with their male parent, or is the male duck himself the model of faithful fatherhood? Unlike many fathers in the animal kingdom, male ducks tend to stay with the mother and help her to rear her brood of ducklings after they’re born. Although they’re not as monogamous as geese or swans, many male ducks also mate for life, (and really, you wouldn’t want to give your father a father’s day card with a swan on it, now would you)? I prefer to think that’s the reason – that someone at hallmark has been sufficiently up on their ornithology to know that male ducks are a model of involved parenting by the father, but it’s always possible that these things are designed by some bitter guy who’s just been through a messy divorce. Some guy who’s sending all the other guys out there a subliminal message: “careful brothers: don’t be a sitting duck!”

I think these days guys can feel a bit like a sitting duck, an easy target for all the pot shots of the feminist movement. Women in recent years have become a lot more vocal about what’s wrong with men, and the rules men must play by, in order not to give offense. Some men suspect that they have become redundant though all of this. Since it seems that they can’t do anything right anyway, perhaps what women would really prefer is for them to get out of the way altogether, and let the gals get on with the show. This summer we’re looking at 13 touchy topics, in the confidence that there is truth to find, or at least a *perspective* arising from the gospel, in which to look at these things. Today I want to touch on

something I have broadly called the gender wars, by which I mean the challenge that feminism has presented not only to all you men out there, but also to Christianity, which, in the eyes of some, has been a preserver of the bygone order, a bastion of male privilege. Now feminism has challenged traditional Christianity at a number of levels. It rejects outright the Bible’s so called “household rules,” those lists of instructions, which Paul gives on domestic matters, including the command: “wives submit to your husbands.” Feminism has also pressed, in the last century, for the inclusion of women in all the offices of the church. The Presbyterian Church in Canada began ordaining women as ministers and elders in 1966, and went through some considerable distress and soul-searching again in the 1980s over this issue. I don’t say that these issues are altogether resolved and that everyone in the PCC is of the same mind about them, but the gender wars today are being fought along a different front.

Since the early 1990s Christian feminism has been setting its sights on reforming the church’s use of *language*. When we speak of “inclusive language” there are two types: language that is inclusive with respect to people, and language that is inclusive with respect to God. The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, which was published in 1989 was a pioneer of the first type – inclusive language with respect to people. For example, it translated the verse “follow me and I will make you fishers of men” as “follow me and I will make you fish for people.” Now this is quite justifiable since Greek has one word for “men” meaning a group of males, and another word altogether for “men” meaning the race of men, or people in general, and in that verse, “men” clearly refers to the race and not the gender. The NRSV also changed “sons of God” to “children of God” and “brothers” – a common mode of address in Paul -- to “brothers and sisters.” To my mind, this is what good Bible translations ought to do – render the sense of the original in the language people are using today. Hardly ever now do you hear the word “mankind” – it is usually “humanity” or “humankind” or “people” – so I see no reason why we must have

our scriptures sounding antiquated, when it’s just as faithful to the original to use the inclusive word. But the NRSV does not use inclusive language with respect to God.

For an example of that, we have the 1997 Book of Praise. It includes a few newer hymns which refer to God as “she” or as “mother” – check out numbers 403 or 310 if you want to see what I mean – but more commonly it takes the older hymns and changes the words to reduce the number of times God is referred to as “him” or “he,” and to get rid of masculine terms like “Father” whenever possible. The revisions made to our first hymn are a good example. Originally each of the verses began “this is my Father’s world” but the 1997 revision changed the second and third verses so that they begin “this is *my maker’s* world” and “this is *my saviour’s* world”. Presumably they left the first verse alone so that we could still find the hymn in the index of first lines. The second verse continues: “This is my maker’s world; God shines in all that’s fair, in the rustling grass God’s footsteps pass, God speaks to me everywhere” -- three repetitions of the word “God” in order to avoid using the male pronoun which occurs in the original: “This is my Father’s world, *he* shines in all that’s fair. In the rustling grass I hear *him* pass, *he* speaks to me everywhere.”

So inclusive language with respect to God cuts deeper than inclusive language with respect to people, and our Book of Praise doesn’t even cut as deeply as you can go. Voices United, the hymnbook of the United Church which came out a year or so before ours pretty much expunges every reference to God as Lord, as Master and as King, and, of course, to God as Father. If you were to apply the same editing principles to the Scriptures and literally cut out all those terms, you’d end up with a shredded Bible.

But it all raises a question doesn’t it? It’s the question one of the Kilmurray boys asked me one day here during children’s time: “Is God a man?” Feminists suspect that most Christians through the ages have indeed thought of God as male, and from this root cause, they see growing up all the various ways in which the church has

kept women down. As the feminist ex nun Mary Daly put it: “where God is male, Male is God.” That is why the front along which the gender wars are being fought these days has shifted, and the reformation of language has become the key issue: women’s submission in the home, women’s exclusion from the offices of the church, these are all just *symptoms* of a more basic problem with the way we picture God. Fix the picture to include in God something feminine, and you will pave the way for the equality and inclusion of women right down the line. “Where God is male. Male is God.” But *is* God male? And if he isn’t, what do we mean by calling him Father?

I was pondering this point as I watched that ad with the priest laying claim to his Father’s Day ice cream cake from Dairy Queen. (Watch the ad on youtube at

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=afgiskKy-b8>). You know the ad I mean? The priest says “people call me father...OK so I’m not a biological father, but it just says “Father’s Day.” He’s right you know – fatherhood does not hang on biology, but it does somehow seem to hang upon maleness. As a male priest he can argue that he is a *kind* of father, whereas it would just be silly for me, as a *female* minister, to try and argue that I was entitled to a Father’s Day cake, by any stretch – which is a shame really! So if Fatherhood is inseparable from maleness in us, you can see where people would get the idea that it’s inseparable from maleness in God too.

The great thing to remember, though, is that God is *not* like us. He does not have a body like us. The Bible says “God is Spirit.” That puts God beyond our gender categories. God is beyond male and female. But we believe the Bible exists so that we may indeed know God in some measure. To what do you compare the incomparable? The best that the Bible can do is to offer us many, many comparisons from the world of our experience, so that taking them all together, we may gain just an inkling of what God is like. God is a shepherd, God is a rock, God is light, God is the commander of armies, God is a husband shamed by a faithless

wife, God is a just judge and an omnipotent king, God is a fierce defender, an advocate for the defenseless, God is a consuming fire, God is a father who teaches his son to walk, and yes, God is a mother comforting her young. As it says in our first Scripture lesson: “As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you.” But these descriptions are not *what God is*. They are, if you like, aids and goads to the imagination, so we can in some way know *what God is like*.

The only direct insight we gain into who God is, comes with Jesus Christ. I think there were a lot of things about Jesus that gave us a window onto God: his compassion, forgiveness, his care and his love, his righteous anger, his sovereignty over nature, health and over death itself, his sheer unexpectedness...I think these things were *important*. I do not think his maleness was *important* in the same way. I don’t think he was incarnate as a man in order to show us that God is male. If God truly is free, then surely he was free to become incarnate as a woman had he wanted to. He picked a man, perhaps because it was fitting for a Second Adam to undo the sin of the first – in any case, if he was going to be human, he would have to come as one sex or the other.

But this Jesus, in what he does reveal about God, reveals this relationship he has, as the unique son of a heavenly Father. Even scholars who do not believe the church’s account of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, will for the most part agree that in the first century there lived this Jew called Jesus – and that he went about announcing something he called “the kingdom” and praying to someone he called “Abba.” This way of addressing God, using the familiar term for Father, was an innovation within Judaism, altogether new with Jesus. And as a practice, it spread throughout Jesus’ disciples, in a form of words they called the Lord’s prayer. Now if Jesus *calls* God “Father” we are here in different territory than those passages of the Old Testament which present *images* of God as a father, images of God as a mother, images of God as a shepherd and so on. If Jesus *calls* God “Father,” then that is not an *image* of God, it is an *identification* of God. It is not human beings

taking the world of their experience and saying, by holy inspiration: I think this is, in some respect, rather like our God. It is God himself, living among us in the form of Jesus, giving us...a revelation! --a bit of knowledge we could *only* get from someone on the inside track.

When Jesus appears to Mary on the morning of his resurrection he says an amazing thing: “Do not hold on to me,” he says “because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” You see what Jesus does? He *extends* the relationship with God in which *he stands*, to *us*. He may call God his Father *by right* – but we come to call God *our* Father *by grace* – because Christ, through his death and resurrection, has transferred us into this relationship with God, which formerly was his special and exclusive privilege.

The letter to the Romans explains further that it is by Jesus’ gift of the Holy Spirit that know the full blessing of what it is to call on that name. When we cry “Abba Father,” the Spirit immediately confirms within us that we really *do* stand in *just* that relationship with God; the Spirit assures us that we are no longer estranged children but children accepted and assured of an inheritance – just as Jesus himself, at the end of his time on earth, was received into heaven, the heir to all its riches. We are heirs of God, says the Spirit, and co-heirs with Christ.

The feminist movement is challenging the church, calling for change, lifting up bits of the biblical witness we had previously ignored, and on many fronts I am supportive and I am grateful; but when it comes to the name of “Father,” we must not let it become a casualty of the gender wars. God is not male, but if you are joined to Christ, then you are a child of the Father. – His Father becomes our Father, and his God becomes our God.

Some of us have known the provision and protection, the positive discipline and profound love of a good earthly father, and so find it easy to trust those qualities in a heavenly father, who is all the more so. Others here will know the goodness of their heavenly

“The gender wars and a God called ‘Father’”

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father as all the more *precious*, because they have *never* known goodness in an earthly father, and at last have found a way of supplanting that one, who was nothing but *bad* news, with the greatest of *good* news. However we look at it, if we are Christian we have two relationships to reflect upon this Father’s day, that are equally real and equally identifying. Perhaps your tribute to one of those relationships will be to buy an ice cream cake or to send a card with a duck, but as for the other, God is satisfied at hearing the cry of his Spirit together with our spirit, Abba! Alleluia! Amen!

Now unto him who longs to gather us like chicks under the wing, and to him who ascended to his Father and our Father, to his God and ours, we give glory in the church, both now and forever.