

Speaking of God

Texts: **Isaiah 6:1-8; John 3: 1-17**; “The Trinity: Always More of God”, from Thomas R. Steagald, *Every Disciple’s Journey*

The other day, Noah, Emily, and Adam came home with a new stuffed tiger which they named Bahinky. Getting a new stuffie is nothing new in our house, though the names have been getting more creative (whereas formerly a tiger would have been called Tigey, now it’s named Bahinky). But what was new was that Bahinky was declared to be gender neutral, and would henceforth have the pronouns they and their, as in “Where is Bahinky?” “They are on the bed. Don’t you see their stripes, Dad?” Kate and I were astonished that the kids even knew about gender neutral pronouns, much less wanted us to employ them for a stuffie.

In case gender neutral pronouns are new to you, some people have declared themselves non-binary, that is, not identifying as either male or female. These people have adopted the ancient practice of using ‘they’ as their pronoun. Kids used pronouns like this forever when they didn’t want their parents to know the gender of the person they were going out with: “Allan, what time are you meeting your friend at the movies?” “I’m meeting them for the 7:30 show!” I might have said, cleverly disguising the fact that I was going on a date with a young woman. Words are important to people, and what we call someone matters. We all intuitively understand this as soon as we find out that there are some words that we just don’t call people, ever, like the N-word for Blacks, the C-word for women, the R-word for developmentally disabled people, and on it goes.

The very fact that there *are* words like that which are used to demean people tells you that language matters and is powerful, and names are important.

So this is Trinity Sunday, and the traditional names we use to talk about the Trinity are Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We get that from passages like the one we heard from John today. There we find all three persons of the Trinity mentioned. The Father is implied and the Son is explicitly mentioned together in the famous verse, John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” Just above that verse, in the same passage, in verse 8, Jesus talks about the Spirit: “The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.” Jesus is talking to Nicodemus, whom he acknowledges as a teacher of Israel, so we know that the common understanding between them is that there is only one God. This comes from Deuteronomy 6:4, called the Shema from its first word in Hebrew: “hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.”

And so we have in this one passage the doctrine of the Trinity in outline: there is only one God, but that God is known in three persons, here called Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That’s the traditional language around the Trinity, so why would we change now? As our society slowly inches away from patriarchy, where men are considered the norm of humanity, we can see that our theology, our iconography, our language has given us a distorted picture of God as an old white male. Just

think of the Creation of Man on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel if you want an example. As we have begun to free ourselves from such thinking, we have come to realize that there is nothing essentially masculine about God's nature.

Back in Old Testament times Israel wanted to contrast their God with the gods of the surrounding peoples. Fertility goddesses like Astarte in Philistia and Ishtar in Babylon were competing with Israel's God, and so a masculine view of Israel's God served as a contrast to them. But as we've looked, we've realized that maleness wasn't an essential quality of God. For one, the gospel of John tells us that God is Spirit, God is Spirit, and using gender, a human category, to speak of Spirit is simply a category mistake: the term doesn't apply. It would be like asking how many wives a bachelor has. If you understand what a bachelor is, you realize that the question about wives is nonsensical. Even asking how many wives a bachelor has, means that you've fundamentally misunderstood the true nature of being a bachelor.

It's the same with asking what gender God is. If you understand that God is a Spirit, and that a spirit is not a gendered creature of this world, it's a nonsensical question to ask which gender God is. In some ways, it's the same with stressing the maleness of Christ. I remember when one of the seminaries at the University of Toronto put up a statue of a crucified woman in its courtyard. Some people immediately called out "Blasphemy! Christ wasn't a woman!" But, of course, that wasn't the point of the statue. The point was that Christ's masculinity was irrelevant to the question of our salvation. There was nothing saving about Jesus being a man rather than a woman. It was an incidental factor in Christ's life. Christ might easily have been a woman and still been our Savior. In fact, given that Jesus was so much else that was looked down on in the ancient world, I'm a little surprised that he wasn't a woman!

Which brings us back to the traditional language of the Trinity. It certainly implies that God is male, and that maleness is more essential to humanity than femaleness, and that is clearly false in the ways that I've just mentioned. It's an excluding formulation for God, leaving men represented, but women unrepresented. Some have suggested that we refer to the Spirit with feminine pronouns to try to balance it out, but that just leaves God 2/3 male, 1/3 female, and we already know that gender and God don't go together.

So what are we to do? Our language is important. We know that, and to continue with a misleading formulation just won't do. Various different versions have been suggested, the most popular of which is the Trinity as Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer. It's a nice, non-gendered substitution, but it isn't quite right, because the first person of the Trinity is more than Creator, the second person is more than Redeemer, and the third person is more than Sustainer. All three were involved in all aspects of the salvation story. For example, again in John's gospel, it tells us that all things were created through God's Word, and it is this same Word that became flesh, this same Word that is the second person of the Trinity. Well, that's saying that, in traditional language, both Father and Son were responsible for Creation. And Genesis tells us that the Spirit of God hovered over the waters of creation, playing a role there, too. So all three persons of the Trinity were involved in the Creation, and simply substituting Creator for Father is also misleading. It's the same with Redeemer

and Sustainer: if you look at Scripture, all three persons of the Trinity are involved in redeeming and sustaining the world, too. So a one to one substitution isn't going to work.

For me, Parent, Child, and Spirit will work as non-gendered ways of talking about God in three persons, always remembering that there is, nonetheless, only one God! Those are good names for the persons of the Trinity that don't mislead us with gendering what can't be gendered. But what about pronouns for God, all the he's and him's we use? What are we to do about them?

Do the kids have it right? As with their new stuffy, Bahinky, should we refer to God as "they, them", using "they" as a non-gendered pronoun? It's tempting to consider using "they" as a singular pronoun when gender isn't important. The complaint that it's new and not English is simply wrong. Using "they" as a non-gendered pronoun is actually a long time feature in English, going back hundreds of years as a usage in our language. (See <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/singular-nonbinary-they>) And using a plural pronoun for the singular idea of God might really capture the essence of the Trinity. It's certainly something to consider as our language grows and develops.

But for the moment, what most theologians have decided is that the proper pronoun for God is, simply, God. That is, there is no pronoun that can replace God because God as a concept is irreplaceable. It's also a solution that works for both Jews and Christians in talking about God, whereas "they/them" would only work for Christian theology. Whatever we decide to do, it's clear that the older language of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is misleading and should only be used sparingly if at all. The language we use matters - and implying that God is male, no matter how traditional that language is - is just wrong, and excludes at least half the human race from fully identifying with God, as being made fully and truly in God's image.

And so, I say, let us celebrate Trinity Sunday with "GodParent, Child and Holy Spirit", using language that includes everyone made in God's image: all the he's, all the she's, and even all the they's of our world.

Amen