

Good News: The Loving God-Parent

Sermon on Mark 1:9-15

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Trinity United, Ottawa

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When we decided on celebrating baptisms today, I snatched this scripture from next week's lectionary readings, because I wanted to preach on it for our baptismal families. Not just for the obvious reason that it is about Jesus' baptism, but because of the images of God it offers us, and the words it attributes to God...words that I want to echo into every baptism and recommend to every parent: *"This is my beloved child, in whom I am well pleased."*

Many of us grew up with just a few images of God that were at best inadequate and at worst traumatic. Some of us were heavily exposed to what I sometimes call the Santa Claus God, as in: "You better watch out, you better not shout...He knows when you are sleeping, he knows when you're awake, he knows when you've been bad or good, so be good for goodness sake!" This God gave gifts, but also observed our every move with a threatening, critical eye. This God was a rather eerie omnipresence, a supernatural superego keeping us under control with the not so subtle bribery of an afterlife in the clouds of heaven, rather than the fires of hell.

No wonder that as we grew up, many of us who only reluctantly gave up our belief in a Santa Claus who brought us real wrapped presents, were more willing to let go of a supernatural God whose gifts to us were less tangible than Santa's - and whose presence was equally susceptible to our developing rational critical minds.

A God who is imaged too much like Santa Claus often does not survive the intelligence of adolescence. Parents, please be aware of this and get to know God better now. Find the images and names for a God whom you can relate to yourself as an adult, before your children begin to question God's existence! If your Christian Education ended at Confirmation and you settle for talking about a Santa

Claus God, or simplified Sunday School God to your kids, you will not likely be able to engage them in helpful discussion about our faith as they grow up. I encourage you to explore today's Christian theology, so that you will be equipped to help them learn about God at each stage of their development. Even the most faithful parents who don't update their Christian Education often feel as inadequate to answer adolescent questions about God as we anglophones do when we are needed to help with French Immersion homework. Or we feel like our parents felt when we brought home the problems of 'New Math'!

Contemporary scholarship about our ancient scriptures has brought to light many ways of imaging and understanding our Christian God that stand up to 21st century thought. God can make sense alongside feminism and quantum science and healthy interpersonal psychology. In this passage about Jesus' baptism we can find some helpful characteristics of God that are more meaningful and enduring than a glorified Santa Claus image. For instance, the words attributed to God suggest a loving and proud parent, who is disposed to see all that is good in this child. A parent who is pleased with their offspring and voices their generous affirmation of the whole child, just for being. A parent who through the formal act of naming out loud in community proudly claims their child: "You are mine, protected and beloved." Just as our baptismal parents here today chose to formally claim and proclaim their children by name.

The words of scripture that I quoted tell us much about the God who Jesus knew and commended us to get to know - the God who in Jesus' Aramaic language he called 'Abba', which means the familiar 'Daddy' rather than the formal 'Father.' I regret the woeful mistranslation that has us praying to 'Our Father', rather than Jesus' 'Dear Daddy.'

Well, that change of name would help some of us to approach God more fearlessly and openly in prayer - those of us who had 'dear daddies' to associate with a loving God-as-parent. I did. But I learned in my pastoral ministering - much more than my feminist theology - that the image of God as Father, even God as Daddy,

could not stand as the only descriptor for God. Not if I wanted to help people to pray and to be open to a real and sustaining relationship with the Holy One.

For those whose experience of their own fathers included neglect, abuse, criticism or abandonment, that broken primal emotional lifeline cannot be used to verbally connect them with their lifeline to God. Both women and men can easily be alienated from God and Christianity, if God is described only as a Father or a male authority figure...because that powerful word and title and role evokes old fear and distrust and pain. No matter what I try to do to reframe the words 'Our Father' as the English words that echo through the ages in Christian community as the signal of our loving, forgiving Christian God, the 'Father in Heaven' figure continues to trigger as much pain in some people, as it does reassurance in others.

So we need many images and titles and descriptions of God... so that everyone can feel included in the genuine love of God's Christian embrace. Thankfully, our Bible is full of them. Some of us especially need the feminine images of God as Sophia, the female wisdom figure in the Hebrew Scriptures. Others need to relate through all of Jesus' parables about his loving and forgiving God. Taken together, all the descriptors for God scattered through our scriptures, can begin to do justice to the Deity who is both within us and beyond us.

In our story today, as well as the loving and affirming parent, we meet God as the dove. The lovely white winged creature of God's creation that depicts the Spirit of God and the presence of Peace. The dove who ever since Noah has reminded us of God's promise of hope to humanity, and whose presence at Jesus' Baptismal moment suggests that he is to be our Prince of Peace.

As Christian community, we all commit along with formal God-parents, to help raise these children to their faith in God. So for this occasion today, let us take hold of the image of God as a truly loving and affirming parent - of either gender, because in our time, unlike Jesus', either parent can legally claim and name their child. Will you all speak together as the voice of God in our community, affirming

these two daughters in Christ and welcoming them as God's gift and promise to our community. As Christian community, will you repeat after me: "Shanna and Fiona" ...*Shanna and Fiona*... "You are our beloved daughters" "*You are our beloved daughters*"... "in whom we are well pleased!" ... "*in whom we are well pleased!*"

Amen!