

Sermon 9-12-21

Paul Purdue preaching

Sophia and Feminine Images of God

Many Thursdays during seminary, I enjoyed a beautiful homemade Indian meal with Pramod and Ranjana in their tiny seminary village apartment. Each meal culminated in cups of lush Indian tea, artfully prepared in a large second hand pot. Ranjana carefully stirred in sugar and cream, never asking us how we liked it, but crafting a sweet concoction that complemented each dish. The Aghammars joined my family for Christmas, Easter, and Thanksgiving and I often drove Pramod to the Indian grocery in Lexington. During Asbury's global church Kingdom Conference, Pramod invited me to a small concert by a famous Indian evangelist and singer. Slipping in the back row, I admired the festive tunics, colorful suris, and felt a bit like the underdressed wedding guest in Matthew 22. The artist opened with warm remarks that I only understood through the language of laughter and smiles. When everyone's head bowed, I knew we were praying. The four musicians played sitars, tablas, and bansuris with beats, scales, and tunes I did not know. Every word spoken or sung was in Hindi. I understood children dancing, hands swaying, and peels of laughter. I knew to leave when everyone started going home. As I slipped out, Pramod caught me and drew me back inside, introducing me to his friends with a delight that deeply welcomed me. With his impeccable manners, Pramod left the party to walk me to my car. Joyful tears streamed down his face as he spoke of the delight of worshipping in one's native tongue. It had been a two year drought. Slowing our pace, Pramod said, *"Oh, Paul, to hear the Good News in the language of your heart is a slice of heaven, like coming home after a too-long journey."*

What is the language of your heart? How does the Good News come alive in your soul? My phone holds songs from AC/DC to Beethoven but nothing quite like the music I heard that night. What felt strange and unfamiliar to me released praise deep in Pramod. What song sets your friend's, neighbor's, or opponent's heart free? Must we all sing the same songs or laud the same formulas before we can delight in the same God's love? Why do I think my song must be yours?

The Apostle Paul expounds the beauty of God's many voices, writing in 1 Corinthians 9: *"to those under the law I speak as one under the law, to those outside the law I became as one outside the law, to the weak I became weak... I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means help some (find the) Good News."* Paul worships our God, who is bigger than all images, idols and icons. In Ephesians 3, Paul prays a radically open-ended prayer, *"I bow my knees before the Creator, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes their name. I pray that, according to the riches of God's glory, each of you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through the Holy Spirit. Oh, that Christ may dwell in your hearts as you are being rooted and grounded in love. May you have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, the breadth and length- the height and depth of the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to God whose power works within us and is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to God be the glory to all generations, forever and ever. Amen."* What does it mean to worship a God who *is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine*? Can we confess our faith in God- Who is bigger than all our creeds, experiences, and imaginations? Do we embrace a flexible faith, like the Apostle Paul, who shaped The Message in order to open every door for every person? Why would we judge the songs resounding in our neighbors' hearts? Why do we think they must sing our song? Paul believed that if someone could catch a

glimpse of Christ's love, everything else would fall into place! That is the kind of deep winsome faith that changes the world.

Proverbs 1-9 sings in a different key. Proverbs employs female God language that the church often ignores. Holy Wisdom, Sophia, is personified as speaking in female form. Some carefully classify these passages as parables, while failing to apply the same metaphorical lens to male God language. Scholars tell us these female images may come from Egypt. To me the source does not matter, what matters is that in Proverbs 2 God speaks in a female voice!

*Wisdom shouts in the street; in the public square She raises Her voice.
Above the noisy crowd, She calls out.*

*At the entrances of the city gates, (where the Patriarchs pontificate) God speaks. She says:
"How long will you clueless people love your naïveté, mocking insight and hating knowledge?"
Look, God speaks, She says: "I'll pour out my spirit on you. I'll reveal my words to
you."(adapted)*

(This spiritual outpouring on us is the same work as the Holy Spirit. Acts 1-2)

Growing up, the images in my first Bible and the God-language in my church did not leave me out. In 1968, my parents bought their two boys a black and a white baby doll, but I guess stores did not sell historically accurate nativity sets, so every Christmas we put out a blue eyed, blond haired, rosy cheeked, lily-white baby Jesus, who by scale weighed 25 pounds and already could lift his holy hand to bless us. Our Christmas kit included one very elegant black wiseman. I could see myself in the titles and images we used to describe God and community- father, son or brother. Praying 'Our Father' or calling our Pastor 'Brother Browne' never left me asking if I had a place at God's table.

Two decades ago, a conversation with someone trying to find her way back to church opened my eyes. She opened up about the abuse she suffered under her very religious father, and how she felt something like a hot rash of shame and irrational panic shoot up her spine when each Sunday we invited her to pray "Our Father." Jesus saw people. Seeing her deep pain softened my heart and opened my mind to different God-language. In Matthew 6, Jesus tells us not to stack up empty words but to pray from our hearts something "like this" or "*in this manner.*" Our exact words do not matter, we are free to loosen or tighten up our rules and liturgies (Matthew 16, 18). Speak to God freely in the language of your heart. Are not our words simply socially agreed upon constructs anyway that change with culture and usage? Words are social constructs and evolve. When we say "*all men are created equal*" we do not believe all males have the same height, weight, and shape. No, we believe all *people* share the same basic human rights. The indwelling Holy Spirit and Love of God free us so that we do not need to learn New Testament Greek. Why we think our song is the only song? Why would we judge someone whose is not in the same place we are in our faith journey? Is not God's Love wider, deeper and richer than our best images, ideas and icons?

Friends, God resides far beyond gender. In John 4, Jesus tells us that "*God is spirit,*" and that authentic worship is a matter of spirit and truth, not which mountain top feels like home or which liturgy we employ. In Galatians 3:28, Paul says that in Christ "*there is no longer male and female, for we are all one in Christ Jesus.*" The love of God surpasses words. Maybe we dare believe in a God big enough to work through their heart-song as well as those icons, hymns, and passages we hold dear? Paul asks, "*Who are you to pass judgment on another? It is before their own Lord that they stand or fall. And they will stand; for the Lord is able to make them stand!*" (Romans 14:4) So listen for another's song...

*In the public square God raises Her voice.
Above the noisy crowd, She calls out.
At the entrances of the city gates, She has Her say:
Look, God speaks, She says, "I'll pour out my spirit on you. I'll reveal my words to you."*

When asked in seminary to recall our first images of Jesus, I thought of my mother. Even today Mom resonates in my heart like an icon of Jesus, my savior. I struggled to learn to read and after my fourth grade teacher read my papers to the class, I often came home in tears or made myself throw up to miss school. For me, the safest place in the whole world was my mother's lap. While sitting in our dining room taking hours to do lessons that my classmates did in ten minutes, my mother steadfastly refused to let me ever believe I was not smart enough. And although I never felt I could be myself at school, church felt as safe as home. Now, these images of God as Mother extend into my thinking about God's judgement. When I read Jesus' words in Matthew 12 "*that on the day of judgement, everyone will have to give account of every word they have spoken,*" I do not see some grey-bearded judge enthroned on high, but my mother in her forties standing there looking over her glasses at me after I clearly chose some wrong path. She raises her voice, not with volume but with Love's expectation saying, "*Paul Robert, I am so disappointed in you, you can do better;*" as I ponder my path, I know She will be with me, loving me even if I fall.

I lament that the early church did not embrace the witness of women more fully. I wish we knew more of the stories of Magdalene, Mary, Joanna, and Salome, those Jesus commissioned as Apostles on Easter. (Matthew 28) We would be richer if the church had kept the testimonies of Mary, Magdalene, Susanna, and Joanna to sing harmony with Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. I wish we had the letters of Priscilla as she and Aquilla planted churches alongside Barnabus and Paul. Alas, we do not, so let us listen more carefully for where God is speaking through female voices today. Let us hear, Her song.

Oh, dear ones, speak to God in the language of your heart. Listen to others' heart songs. God's love is beyond *the breadth, length, height, and depth of our comprehension*. God's power is working not just in us but in those with different songs. Let us not believe our song is the only song.

Let us sing together:

*In the public square God raises Her voice.
Above the noisy crowd, She calls out.
At the entrances of the city gates, She has her say:
Look God speaks, She says, "I'll pour out my spirit on you. I'll reveal my words to you." Amen.*