

THE MOTHERHOOD OF GOD

Yale theologian Miroslav Volf begins a new book on the topic of giving with a dramatic personal story.

Volf and his wife had taken their adopted three-month-old son to visit his birth mother and her ten-year-old daughter, the baby's sister.

"The first thing I saw was a tear—a huge unforgettable tear in the big brown eyes of a ten-year-old girl. Then I saw tears in her mother's eyes. And in all their tears just enough joy was mixed with pain to underscore that pain's severity; their joy at seeing him, their three-month-old brother and son, and their intense pain that it was the first time they'd seen him since he was just two days old, when they'd kissed him good-bye." (Free of Charge, p. 11)

Volf admits that even though he was deeply, profoundly grateful for the gift of his son, he still had a lingering negative view of a mother who would give up her baby, for any reason. It just didn't seem right. But during that meeting his mind changed profoundly. The child's birth mother handed him a letter she had written and asked Professor Volf to read it to the boy later.

"I did it for you," she wrote to her child. *"Someday you will understand."*

Volf reflects: *"She loved him for his own sake and therefore she would rather have suffered his absence if he flourished than to have enjoyed his presence if he languished. Now it was my turn to cry over the beauty and tragedy of her love."*

In that mother's selfless, sacrificial love, Miroslav Volf, academician, professional theologian, saw a metaphor, a picture of the love of God to which Christian faith points and upon which the Christian church is built.

(1) It is Mother's Day, an occasion that always poses a challenge to ministers. In theological school you are taught that Mother's Day is not really a religious holiday at all but a product of purely commercial interests—the greeting card people, florists, and restaurant owners—an example of how the culture invades and takes over the church and tries to co-op it into a culture of consumerism, so the faithful thing to do is simply ignore it.

I have frankly never agreed with that, partly because I do find myself remembering fondly the one who gave me birth, and the Mother's Day custom in our church during my childhood: we wore a flower in our lapel when we went to church—a red carnation because mother was alive. My father wore a white carnation because his mother had died.

I also agree with Miroslav Volf that Mother's Day has important theological potential because motherhood - a mother's heart, that birth mother's selfless love - are, in fact, authentic ways to talk about God and God's love.

And it is a way the Bible talks about God.

"Let us make humankind in our image," God says in the Genesis creation account. *"So God created humankind in his image—male and female."* Which is to say you've got to have the feminine as well as the masculine if you want to have an authentic biblical image of God?

The prophet Isaiah wrote, *"Can a woman forget her nursing child? . . . Yet, I will not forget you."*

And my favourite, from the prophet Hosea:

*When Israel was a child, I loved him. . . .
It was I who taught [them] to walk;
I took them up in my arms. . . .
I was to them like those
who lift infants to their cheeks.
I bent down to them and fed them.*

Those are specifically feminine, maternal images: bending down and feeding is an allusion to nursing used to describe God and God's relationship to us.

This is not just a politically correct effort to be inclusive but one of the most ancient Judeo-Christian concepts of God. The Bible, written thousands of years ago in a strongly patriarchal culture, uses masculine images for God about 75 percent of the time: king, warrior, father. But remarkably, for that age, the Bible also uses feminine images, a nursing mother, a compassionate nurturer, a comforting, sheltering maternal figure—a mother.

(2) Language limits, of course. As soon as you use words—nouns, pronouns, adjectives—to describe God, you limit God.

It was the genius of Judaism to understand that. In a time when ancient religion knew exactly what the gods acted like and looked like—and so could be represented by idols—Israel's strongest taboo was against the use of idols of any kind, even the idols of language. And so when it came to the name of God, ancient Israel used a list of consonants, something like JHWH, which we sometimes pronounce Yahweh and from which the word *Jehovah* is derived.

But they didn't say it, because even to say it was to limit the mystery and majesty of God.

It was women biblical scholars in our day that helpfully recovered the notion and taught us that exclusive masculine language not only limits God but doesn't do justice to the biblical point that

God cannot be limited and that if all we have are masculine words and images, what we have is not God at all but an idol.

But change isn't easy. If you've been calling God nothing but "Father" in your prayers since childhood, it isn't easy to use other terms.

Integrity insists, however, that we at least acknowledge the overwhelming and sometimes unnecessary use of masculine language in scripture and the liturgies of the church. The Greek word *anthropos*, for instance, does not have to be translated "man." It can also be "person." And so "Let your light shine among men" could also be translated "among all people." And, indeed, in our day, it probably should

Israel's genius was in understanding the oneness of God, the gift of monotheism, and the mystery of God that cannot be limited by human idols—either made of wood or words—and, at the same time, the nearness, the closeness, the immediacy, the intimacy, the personhood of God.

God is personal. That's the point. The creator God comes close. The mysterious one who rides on the wings of the storm also holds the people in his or her arms. The one who fashions the sun and moon hears the cries of the people and comes with comfort and compassion like a loving father. The one who sets the stars in the heavens comes down to people, to feed and embrace them like a loving mother. It is very much a parental God the Bible presents.

(3) Jesus was revolutionary on the topic. In a culture that regarded women as property, chattel, with no rights at all and no status or role to play outside the home, even in the synagogue, Jesus was utterly progressive. He associated with women, publicly, which no male was supposed to do other than with his wife. He talked with women, bantered with women, ate and drank with women. Mary and Martha of Bethany were his dear friends. And it was to Mary of Magdala that the risen Christ first appeared.

When it came to gender politics, Jesus was a revolutionary. And when it came to God language, he was downright radical. In referring to God he invoked one of the most intimate words in the Aramaic language, the language Jesus himself spoke. It was the word "Abba," masculine to be sure, but the intimate word a child would use to address his or her father in the intimacy of the home and family circle. "Daddy" is probably as close as we can come in English.

That's the Aramaic word which our Bible translates as "our Father" in what we call the Lord's Prayer.... Abba...

And what is so different and so stunning about the word is its intimacy. Jesus is clearly suggesting that God is as close and intimate as a mother or a father is to a precious child.

Fred Craddock captures the sense of it when he refers to something a mother might say to her child who has fallen down and bumped or scraped an arm or leg: "*Here, let me kiss it and make*

it well,” she says as she gathers the child in her lap. Is it the kiss that makes it well? No. It’s those moments in a mother’s lap. It’s that closeness and intimacy, Craddock says.

Jesus Christ invites us to sit for a while in the lap of God, who knows us, who hurts when we hurt, who experiences our fears, our anxiety, our joys—a God who loves us.

When St. Paul describes what happens in the Divine–human encounter, the new situation in which we find ourselves in Christ, he too uses the intimate parental word “Abba”. In Christ we become the adopted children of God, he says - God’s daughters and sons. . *“See what love God has for us that we are called children of God* “he writes in another place... And so we are.”

What do you and I need most in the world? After our physical needs for food, water, shelter, what is it we most long for? When we’re in trouble, when out of the blue disaster strikes, a loved one is taken from us, the test comes back positive, a relationship ends, the bottom falls out, or merely at the end of the day, late at night, when you find yourself asking “What’s it all about?”—what is it you and I most need to hear and to know?

There are many ways to answer that question, of course, but most of them come down to something like we most need to know that we are here on purpose, not by accident, that we are cared about, that we matter to someone, that we are wanted, that we are loved.

And that, in its simplest, straightest form is what the gospel of Jesus Christ is about. You and I are here on purpose, and cared about. We are wanted and loved by the One who created us. We matter beyond our imagining to the One who is like a waiting father running down the road to welcome a prodigal home, or like a mother cradling her nursing child.

Thanks be to God. Amen.