

Pentecost, Year B
Acts 2:1-11
Ps 104 *passim*
1Cor 12:3b-7, 12-13
Jn 20:19-23

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Little Julie, six years old, was intently focused on the drawing she was making. Her grandfather asked, "Julie, what are you doing?"

"I'm drawing a picture of God, Grandpa."

"But, Julie, nobody knows what God looks like."

"Of course not, Grandpa. I'm not done with my picture yet!"

God created us human beings in his own image and likeness. We oftentimes try, like Julie, to create God in our own image and likeness, and that's a temptation we should resist. And yet every human being forms an image of who God is. But every image we form is imperfect and incomplete and therefore every image must be temporary, provisional, subject to refinement and maybe even change.

We use language to express ideas and feelings. We wrap words around thoughts. And frequently our thinking takes the form of using something we already are familiar with to describe something new and unfamiliar. That use of words is what we call metaphor.

Some metaphors are easy to recognize. We know, for instance, that God the Father is a spirit and yet we have no problem in saying that the risen Lord Jesus, having ascended into glory, now sits at the right hand of the Father. But the Father has no right hand – except metaphorically.

Jesus told us to think of God as a Father. Jesus gave us that metaphor, and it therefore has a privileged place in our prayer and worship. We imagine all the good qualities that make up the perfect father and we imagine that all those qualities are realized to the full in God. Some people, however, cannot hear the word father without trembling in fear. Some people have not experienced good things at the hands of their fathers, and there's no use forcing them to relate to God as father. They need another image, a different metaphor, to find in God the tenderness and intimacy Jesus wanted us to see.

God cannot be confined, reduced, or boxed into to any single image. Every metaphor and every image has limitations. Jesus did not have us call God Father because God is male. No, God transcends gender differences: God is not male to the exclusion of the female nor female to the exclusion of the male. God is bigger than any image we can form. Mentally, every time I use a male pronoun in referring to God – you know: he, him, his, himself – I try to put quotation marks around it, to help me not fall into the trap of thinking of God in gendered terms. Jesus, who was unmistakably male, didn't

hesitate to apply a female metaphor to himself. In their Gospels both Matthew [23:37] and Luke [13:34] tell how Jesus, lamenting over Jerusalem, said that he desired to gather the children of Jerusalem like a mother hen gathers her chicks under her wings.

If you want to develop, in your own prayer life, a more directly feminine image, you might find it in the Holy Spirit. Christians find in the opening lines of Genesis, the first book of the Bible, the earliest reference to the Holy Spirit in Scripture. There the primordial chaos, on the eve of creation, is described as a “formless void.” And over the formless void swept a “wind from God,” which is sometimes also translated as the “Spirit of God.” That wind, that breath, that Spirit, is translated from the Hebrew word *ru’ah*, which is a feminine noun. Of course the Holy Spirit is no more a “she” than a “he,” but the text gives us a basis in Scripture for seeing the Holy Spirit in a feminine light.

The New Testament has provided us with our standard images of the Holy Spirit. All four Gospel writers report that Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist, and they all mention that the Holy Spirit came down upon Jesus “like a dove.” Not “as a dove,” or “in the form of a dove,” but “like a dove.” Look too at the vivid images we get in today’s first reading, from the Acts of the Apostles: A noise like a strong driving wind came from the sky and filled the house. Tongues as of fire shot out and came to rest upon them. And they were filled with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit grabs hold, sometimes like a dove and sometimes like a burning flame.

As in so many places in the Bible stories, the writers were using words to describe unprecedented events, things that had never happened before. Even with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, human language can take us only so far in trying to communicate the mighty works of God. How do you describe the indescribable?

I am struck by how well our own Cathy Douglass has worked with the images of the dove and the fire in the banner you see directly below me and in the banners flanking the presider’s chair behind me. Recognizing the metaphors, the artist doesn’t over-literalize. Her figures *represent* a bird in flight and they *represent* fire without depicting them literally. They are rich images that evoke strong emotions. I think they are worth spending time on, and spending time with them is a beautiful form of prayer.

In the Nicene Creed that we recite at Mass we refer to the Holy Spirit as the Lord and giver of life. In Genesis the Creator formed Adam out of the dust of the earth and gave him life by breathing into his nostrils. John the Evangelist shows that on the evening of Easter Sunday, Jesus breathed new life into the disciples and thereby gave them the Holy Spirit.

The responsorial psalm draws a sharp contrast. We heard the cantor sing: If you take away your creatures' breath, O Lord, they fall apart and become dust again. But when you breathe on them again, when you send forth your breath, your spirit, they are newly created and you renew the face of the earth.

Next Sunday is Trinity Sunday. God the Father is the transcendent God, the God up there and out there. God the Son is the immanent God, the God down here who walks beside us. God the Holy Spirit is the God who dwells within. I invite you in the coming week to spend time each day reflecting upon how you image God. When hear "God the Father," what image comes to mind? How about "God the Son"? And the Holy Spirit? Consider: does your image of God work? Does it still work? Without remaking God in your own image and likeness, is there an image that will move you closer to God?