

**Sermon Preached
by Doug King
May 11, 2003
3rd Sunday in Eastertide
Hosea 11:1-4, Luke 15:8-10**

This entire religion endeavor is really rather silly. We gather together to name what cannot be named, to quantify what is beyond quantity, to describe what is beyond description. When it comes to God the only truly safe thing to say comes from the Quaker tradition, just sit in silence. But there is no way you are ever going to be able to separate Presbyterians from our precious words, so to the words we go.

In our quest for a vocabulary of God we journey in a landscape of metaphor. We apply words and phrases to our God and hope that we have captured some small aspect of the one beyond all words. Jesus, in his teaching sought to give us a vocabulary for God. He gave us many powerful images in a variety of parables and other lessons. But one of his words for God has been more popular than all the others by far. We use it every Sunday when we say the Lord's Prayer, Father, our Father.

At the time that Jesus shared this metaphor for God it was revolutionary. No one spoke of God in such personal terms. In fact a more accurate translation of Jesus' metaphor "Abba" is actually Daddy. Speaking of God in such terms transformed how many people thought of God from a deity at a distance to one who was intimately present in our lives. The image of God as Father has been a helpful metaphor for many in their understanding of the divine.

But as it is with all metaphors we gain an understanding but we are also limiting our understanding. As much as we speak of God being beyond gender, we rest too often upon male images for our God. Our intellects are intelligent enough to know that God cannot be reduced to being an old man with a white beard, but that does not mean we do not run the risk of limiting our God to male images and stereotypes. On this Sunday

when the secular calendar honors the importance of Mothers, it would not be a bad idea for us to be reminded of how potent a metaphor it is for us to think of God as Mother.

If we think of God as a woman, as a mother, how does that affect our thoughts and feelings about God? I suppose it would depend upon our own images of women and mothers. As we well know women and mothers come in all shapes and sizes and temperaments. But I do carry a certain image of God as a woman, as a mother, or perhaps more precisely a grandmother. Perhaps this is because I never knew my own grandmothers.

I think about the older women I have known that are fearless and filled with a moxie. They are exactly who they want to be and they say exactly what they want to say. In my office I have a framed print of a well known poem by Jenny Joseph which speaks of the freedom age and wisdom can bring.

"When I am an old woman I shall wear purple
With a red hat which doesn't go and doesn't suit me.
And I shall spend my pension on brandy and summer glove
And satin sandals, and say we've no money for butter.
I shall sit down on the pavement when I'm tired
And gobble up samples in shops and press alarm bells
And run my stick along the public railings
And make up for the sobriety of my youth
I shall go out in my slippers in the rain
And pick the flowers in other people's gardens
And learn to spit.
You can wear terrible shirts and grow more fat
And eat three pounds of sausages at a go
Or only bread and pickle for a week
And hoard pens and pencils and beer mats and things in boxes
But now we must have clothes that keep us dry
And pay our rent and not swear in the street

And set a good example for the children
We must have friends to dinner and read the papers.
But maybe I ought to practice a little now?
So people who know me are not too shocked and surprised
When suddenly I am old, and start to wear purple."

When I picture God as a woman I think of the many wonderful older women I have known who have reached a place in their lives that is characterized by a great freedom. Women and mothers and grandmothers who have seen and lived enough of this world's joys and tragedies to recognize what is truly valuable. I think of women like the late great Peg Hand and her charming hospitality, her candy dish that was always full, her wonderful hearty laughter, her inner strength of knowing exactly who she was, the glimmer of mischief in her eyes. When I see God as a woman, as a grand mother, as a great grandmother, as the greatest grandmother of them all, I picture God as wise enough to be boldly quixotic. I picture a God who reaches beyond all of our self inflicted rules and practicality to be loving and joyful, tender and funny, and utterly enchanted by humanity even when we are far from being enchanting.

I have to admit it, I much prefer to think of our God as similar to the wonderful theatrical character "Auntie Mame" rather than some stuffy button down old man. I think about the kind of woman who would spend all day looking for a single lost coin she could choose to live without and then throw a party when it is found. I think about the kind of God who would be bold and impractical enough to keep calling for us no matter how long we choose not to respond and remain lost. I think about the kind of God who would be bold and impractical enough to dedicate eternity to reaching out in love to every single one of us no matter who we are or what we have done. Thank God for the older women in our lives who teach us the wisdom of being playful and bold and impractical and strong and loving. I can only hope our God wears purple with a red hat which doesn't go. Amen.