

Module 6 Workshop Guide

Why do words and images for God matter?

Pages 86-98 in Faith, Sexism, Justice: Conversations Toward a Social Statement

<http://www.elca.org/womenandjustice>

PowerPoint slides for this unit are at this website, also.

Opening Prayer – *See Suggested Prayers by Pastor Connie Winter-Eulberg on the ELCA Sierra Pacific Synod website or see prayers on pages 22-23 of the study guide.*

Prayer

Hospitable God, you welcome all people to come to you as a hen gathers her chicks around her. Show us the way to be welcoming to all people especially those who cannot imagine you as “male” or “female”. Help us to bring a variety of images of you to our worship, education and prayer. You are bigger than our pronouns and more expansive than our language. Open our minds and hearts to provide hospitable language to include all people in our community. AMEN (Pastor Connie Winter-Eulberg, 2017)

Language and images for God affect us deeply; they both shape and express our faith. No single image, name or phrase is capable of communicating the fullness of God. Together, we will learn about the sources for **EXPANSIVE LANGUAGE AND IMAGERY** for God (diverse and multiple human and non-human language and imagery) and discuss what this diversity tells us about the God of faith.

Scripture:

Isaiah 46:5,9

To whom will you liken me and make me equal, and compare me, as though we were alike? ... Remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like me.

Words and images are extremely powerful.

How do Words and Images shape and affect us? (Exercise:10 minutes)

Invite participants to take one minute to:

1. *Recall one experience in which a symbol or a word served to heal or hurt them.*
2. *Write down at least one way they felt.*

*Then ask participants to take one minute to review the list of statements (below) about language, drawn from social linguistic research. **Please mark the statements that match your experiences.***

Language and images or symbols

- create power dynamics.
- express truth.
- hurt people.
- heal people.
- shape our understandings of the world and ourselves.
- influence people at an early age.
- are learned by rote in religious rituals before we understand their meanings.¹

Take two minutes to hear very brief comments from a few people about the following questions.

What rang true for you in this chart? In what ways is language powerful?)

Language and images about God affect faith.

If everyday language is so powerful, think about religious language, in particular, language and images for God. Words and images about God matter a great deal because they express understandings of who God is. Scripture is full of a variety of images and language about God. They are not literal, and sometimes they are downright paradoxical.

Language and images about God also affect our understanding of ourselves, both as individuals and as communities.

****(Divide the large group into 3 groups. Have each group read one of the stories. Have them discuss the 2 questions below:***

(Note: Website has Module 6 Exercise on language about God .)

Story 1

While walking home after work, Ruth was raped by a stranger posing as a jogger. She was a teenager. Days afterward, he called her house, bringing more terror to her parents. He was never apprehended. Fear and anger covered her and her family. Many images of God fed them in their grief. Now an adult, Ruth is one of many survivors of violence who say that predominantly male-identified language and images of God hurt. Instead, she experiences God's love and healing through God as woman, God as mother, God like her.²

Story 2

A man in prison was visited by a young pastor who had been assigned there by his seminary. The pastor tried to console the man by assuring him of the love of God the Father. The man stopped the pastor. "Don't talk to me about a father's love. I only saw my father a few times in my life, and each time he beat me. He abused me and my mother and my sisters and brothers. That's what I know of fathers."³

Story 3

With great joy, we gathered for the baptism of our granddaughter, Hannah. Though I believe Scripture's promise that Hannah is created in the image of God, I was troubled that her baptismal service included only male and neutral language for God. Yes, I know the theological and ecumenical reasons for baptizing in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit; still I wondered why other parts of the liturgy didn't include more expansive images for God (Mother of all life; Holy Wisdom calling us to her table).

And then I wondered: Would it be so surprising if Hannah were to struggle more than her older brother in seeing herself in the divine image? If the worship they experience uses mostly male pronouns and images to speak of God, wouldn't it be entirely possible for our grandson to carry a deeper sense that he bears God's image?

Questions:

1. How can we support the need for someone like "Ruth" who is able to see God only as a woman/mother?
2. How can we as a community of Christ respond to someone who cannot see God as a father because of the sins of an earthly father?
3. How can we include girls as well as boys in our language of being created in God's image?

To be sure, incorporating more expansive images for God doesn't mean we abandon cherished prayers like the "Our Father." We simply find other places to incorporate female images – images from Scripture – so that all people, including Hannah, may more clearly hear the good news of God's love for them.⁴

II. WHAT LANGUAGE AND IMAGERY ABOUT GOD ARE IN SCRIPTURE? (15 MINUTES)

Scripture provides a variety of expansive language and images about God.

**(Note to leaders: Divide the group into pairs or groups of three. Assign each group a list of verses, either 1-6 or 7-13. If the group is working without a hard copy of the entire study, make photocopies of the verses for*

handouts.

Invite groups to:

Skim the verses for a minute and notice how the images and language make you feel. Start to wonder why these particular feelings are evoked.

Reflect on these questions together:

- 1. What do you think these images say about God?*
- 2. What do you think these images say about humankind? ☒*

After participants have read and discussed the verses, gather in a large group and hear short responses from a few people.)

When we seek to proclaim the good news of God's love in Christ in ways that minister to many people, we can turn to Scripture and theology for resources.

1 "The Rock, his work is perfect, and all his ways are just."
(Deuteronomy 32:4a)

"You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you; you forgot the God who gave you birth." (Deuteronomy 32:18)

"Indeed their rock is not like our Rock; our enemies are fools."
(Deuteronomy 32:31)

2 "The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?" (Psalm 27:1)

3 The LORD says to Israel of those who are wayward, "I will fall upon them like a bear robbed of her cubs, and will tear open the covering of their heart; there I will devour them like a lion, as a wild animal would mangle them." (Hosea 13:8)

4 Jesus says: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing." (Matthew 23:37)

5 “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? ... Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it?” (Luke 15:4,8)

(For the full text, see Luke 15:1-10.)

6 God says about Israel: “Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I who took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them.” (Hosea 11:3-4)

7 “You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with glad cries of deliverance.” (Psalm 32:7)

8 Moses proclaims to all of Israel: “As an eagle stirs up its nest, and hovers over its young; as it spreads its wings, takes them up, and bears them aloft on its pinions, the LORD alone guided [Jacob]; no foreign god was with him.” (Deuteronomy 32:11-12)

9 “As the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the LORD our God, until he has mercy upon us.” (Psalm 123:2)

10 God says: “For a long time I have held my peace, I have kept myself still and restrained myself; now I will cry out like a woman in labor, I will gasp and pant.” (Isaiah 42:14)

11 God says to Israel: “Listen to me, O house of Jacob, all the remnant of the house of Israel, who have been borne by me from your birth; carried from the womb; even to your old age I am he, even when you turn gray I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save.” (Isaiah 46:3-4)

12 God says: “Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.”

(Isaiah 49:15)

13 God says: “As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.” (Isaiah 66:13)

At times, gender roles are subverted or mixed in Scripture.

**(Note to leaders: Ask one or two people to read the following section aloud while the group follows along. Encourage participants to circle anything in the texts that strikes them about gender roles. This exercise should take no more than a few minutes.)*

1. Paul describes himself as a mother in labor: “My little children, for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you,” (Galatians 4:19)
2. Jesus washes his followers’ feet. (John 13:1-20) “[Jesus] got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.” (John 13:4-5)

Biblical commentators have noted that the towel Jesus put on his waist was the symbol of those who washed other people’s feet: Jewish wives and slave girls. Foot washing was done by females for males and symbolized a particular relationship of either marital service and intimacy or servitude. Yet while foot washing was an act of hospitality, love and honor, it was simultaneously “an unequivocal signal of hierarchical power relationships.” The husband does not do this for the wife. A Jewish male slave would not do this for anyone because of the problems of defilement, even though a slave. A free man would never wash another’s feet.⁵

This subversion is exactly what is happening in the text. What Jesus does offends the disciples specifically because his activity is a female’s role! Jesus disrupted accepted gender roles. Jesus was gender non-conforming and put on the symbol of these women, a towel at the waist. Even more scandalous, Jesus tells the disciples that they, too, should wash each others feet!

As we move from Scripture to written and visual theology, keep these “gender paradoxes” in mind. You will have a chance to reflect on these in a few minutes.

IV. WHAT ARE SOME EXAMPLES OF THE WAYS ARTISTS EXPRESS SACRED TRUTH IN IMAGES? (15 MINUTES)

The following images come from different artists in different parts of the world and different times in history. Some of them are from contexts where artwork in churches was a primary means of Christian education because they were largely non-literate. Images needed to communicate strongly about the church's understandings of God and Jesus Christ.

"I don't know what sort of power images have that they can so forcefully enter and affect one, and make everyone long to hear and speak in imagery." – Martin Luther

Read for the group:

For what do you most yearn in God's relationship with you? You are invited to write down key words for yourself or draw anything that comes to mind. Hold on to your yearnings as you are introduced to some images.

Visual images communicate truth. PowerPoint slides at ELCA.org/womenandjustice

- 1. First, go through the images without commentary, staying on each image about 10 seconds. Stress an invitation for everyone to open themselves to the images, keeping in mind what they most yearn for in God's relationship with them.*
- 2. The second time through the images, share the commentary found in the leader's guide to expand different understandings of them.*

Reflect alone or in small groups

- 1. How do these images make you feel? What spoke to you in your yearnings for God, and why? Identify at least one image that speaks to you in a new way.*
- 2. What thoughts do these images evoke?*

3. If any of these images were used regularly in worship and study in your local congregation, what effect do you think they might have on worship and faith?

V. IN WHAT WAYS DO LANGUAGE AND IMAGERY FOR GOD MATTER? (5 MINUTES)

In recent decades, Christian theologians have written much about inclusive and expansive language and images for God. Pastors and other church leaders have used expansive images and language about God in their preaching, teaching and ministry in order to communicate the Word of God in a variety of scripturally and theologically faithful images and language.

An important part of this theological work is naming how the use of almost exclusively male-identified language and images is theologically problematic and pastorally harmful.

Theologian Elizabeth Johnson suggests three ways that using predominantly male language for God can be harmful.

First, because exclusively male images offer no alternatives, they get taken literally. The use of male language alone leads us to forget the incomprehensible mystery of God and can reduce the living God to an understanding of God as an infinitely powerful man. This is poor theology about God.

This literalism can also lead to the unwarranted idea that maleness has more in common with God than femaleness. Exclusively male images imply that women are somehow less like God or are more distant from God than males are. This is poor theology about humanity.

Second, the effect of taking masculine images of God literally can lead to idolatry. Prophets have long insisted on the need to turn away from idols, gods who are not true. God is not literally a father or a king or a lord, just as much as God is not literally a rock or a hen or a woman in labor. God is ever so much greater!

Third, the exclusive use of patriarchal language for God has

powerful social effects, functioning to justify patriarchy in church and society. In other words, if God is understood as male and women are seen as less than men, it becomes easy to justify attitudes and behaviors that discriminate against and devalue women and girls. However, Scripture and Christian theology witness to an understanding of God that transcends gender, and they offer us life-giving ways to proclaim the gospel so that all may hear and all may share life in equal measure.⁸

Module 6: Why do words and images for God matter?

Questions to Ask the Group -

1. In what ways do you think language and imagery about God matter?

In addition, if you have more than one hour for your session, spend some time journaling about and/or discussing these questions in small or large groups:

1. In what ways do you suppose predominantly male language might get in the way of the proclamation of the gospel for some people? In other words, in what ways might language harm our neighbor? In what ways might language heal and care for our neighbor?
2. Why do you think Christians sometimes are uncomfortable talking about language for God? What might we gain through openness to new language and imagery? What are we afraid we might lose?
3. What might happen in your congregation if your worship services had more female images for God? What might happen in your own heart? Why do you think you or your congregation would have these thoughts or feelings? If possible, identify specific suggestions to enrich your community's worship language and imagery.

Ending Prayer:

Let us pray,

Fountain of love and giver of hope, we are filled with gratitude for all of your children in this circle. The love that radiates between us holds us up and gives us hope. We know that we are your children and you have made us beautiful, intelligent, resourceful, grateful, powerful human beings. AMEN (Connie Winter-Eulberg, 2017)

COMPLETE THE RESPONSE FORM. TURN IT IN TO BE MAILED TO CHURCHWIDE IN CHICAGO. *A shortened response form is on the Sierra Pacific Website.*

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