

“Father and mothers” (9May21)
John15:9-17; 1John5:1-7

It seemed an odd coincidence that on Mothers’ Day, our Gospel reading happened to have so much Father language. I didn’t clean up and edit the gendered stuff as I usually would, though. After hearing it that way, I wanted you to listen again another way, and notice if or how this feels different to you:

Jesus said, “As the Mother has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Mother’s commandments and abide in her love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the owner is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Mother. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Mother will give you whatever you ask her in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.”

So how was that? I’d love to hear your reflections. Maybe—especially today—it made you picture your own mother. Beyond that, I wonder whether the gender and term alterations helped you to hear what Jesus was saying, or not. Did it feel somehow liberating and closer, or was it kinda strange or awkward? Did the change make it less true, or more? (Either-or might be a bad prism to force it into, particularly for Lutherans who love to say both-and!)

Within or behind this little practice of hearing God the Father and God the Mother is a perhaps more fundamental base-level question about whether we’re able to reframe our mindsets and see differently, or if the whole thing needs to be torn

apart. I mean, simply by hearing the word “Father” are we so totally preconditioned for one train of thought that we would just plain need to stop using it, or does other possibility remain within the word?

While the term “Father” could default us to picturing a white-bearded guy in the sky, I believe that we can deeply understand Jesus to use this language of Father not to reinforce patriarchy on a divinely-sanctioned level, but precisely to subvert it.

It’s like when Jesus uses the image of a kingdom, it largely reverses how we’d usually understand kings ruling.

Again, the surprising language about his servants in this passage today hearkens to a couple chapters and few minutes earlier on this same night, when Jesus stooped to wash their feet and said that if he, the one they call Teacher and Lord has taken the servant’s spot, they should do it, too. He leads and teaches by example, I guess we’d say. More, he shows he is Lord and Master in the way of a servant, the opposite of our presumed definitions for how that relationship operates.

So when Jesus uses the term Father, we can hear it in a way unlike and even contradicting the historical sense of fathers that gave us patriarchal systems. It might be that what he portrays of God the Father is more like how we’d traditionally see mothers—not controlling but loving. So he could’ve just called God, Mother! But using that term could make it fit into or maybe even reinforce our stereotypes and sinful systems, rather than challenging them and reframing our viewpoint.

Still, I recognize the possibility you see Jesus first and predominantly as male. That could make you want to rule him out and reject the whole thing, as if his being a man meant he was inevitably representative of the sinful system, and can’t fully be against it.

Yet if God and Jesus never meant to embody our usual models of masculine vs. feminine, maybe Jesus isn’t centrally seen just as a male, and we need to queer our outlook. God is identified with a poor, rural Palestinian, maybe with a single mother, and died executed by those in power. So it might well be that the God of Jesus wasn’t just

reversing the power structures, lifting up the lowly and casting the mighty from their thrones, maybe didn't intend to be a typical voice of authority, but was from and for those on the periphery.

We might also go on to wonder whether John's Gospel wasn't written as a focal point and central repository for settling theological arguments about the nature of God, but was a reminder and encouragement of abiding love for a small community. It may feel, then, less of a commandment from on high to love, but more of an enticement to see things differently, including ourselves, as beloved.

With that, it's only as ironic ideas that this could be counted as a victory, in the language of our 2nd reading. It must also redefine what a victory is. Not military mastery, but that love wins. Not victory over, but with.

Extrapolating from this sense of God and Jesus and our purpose, we may well realize I'm not supposed to be a central voice, broadcasting from here in this central place out to you, with this new camera zoomed in on me. Not only that, but I fully realize and am stuck with the caveat that I'm a male saying all this.

Here I am, front and center, educated white male and all.

So maybe I should apologize.

Maybe we just call this wrong and demand I shut up.

Instead, I'll try to suggest that unless we can hear this from a straight, white man, the system hasn't been subverted. In some form, it would still be playing into the standard power structures, rather than creating new possibility.

I certainly don't want to be dictatorial, to have it my way, to be the center of attention. When Luther Seminary updated its mission statement with flashy jargon about training leaders, I fondly remember a professor railing against it by saying that "what people need is a pastor, not a God damned leader."

So can this serve for us to see that we're in it together? Our practice is about loving, and being loved in return. That's what I want for you, for us,

not least because it's what Jesus wants and is doing.

Once more, if Jesus is tearing apart the old systems and structures, we set aside other definitions as wrongly centered, including definitions of success or power in our world. And we instead do what we can to move on together in love, with that as our central definition.

Does that mean Jesus' main project could be framed as the justice of undoing hierarchies of domination, or is it love, period? Or might we find one of those isn't possible without the other—no love, no justice; no justice, no love?

To wrap this up, I could offer a salutation or benediction, saying: Happy Mothers' Day and look for the Gospel to fit into that. Or perhaps the larger point that achieves some of the purpose is to declare: I love you. As Jesus was loved by one he (for whatever reason) called Father and, therefore, as Jesus loved us. I love you. And because of how this operates in us, I thank you for loving me as we abide inescapably in the love of God.