



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea
The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida

THE NINTH SUNDAY
AFTER PENTECOST
JULY 30, 2023

A Homily by the Rev. James J. Popham

Is God our father and/ or our mother? Actually, God is both and neither. God is inscrutable, beyond our human understanding, but when we describe God, our vocabularies and imaginations simply are not big enough to comprehend all that God is. But if we are, as the creation story tells us, made in or as the image of God, and we are male and female, then God rightly may be considered as both.

Only because the Bible "came into being in patriarchal societies, cultures, and religions and is written in masculine-centered language and serves patriarchal interests" has our language of God been male. And our language only perpetuates that preference, obscures the true nature of God, and sadly encourages exploitation and marginalization of women.(1) It hardly is a surprise then that the theology, tradition, and practice of the Church itself were insinuated with misogyny, which would not be seriously challenged until the 20th century. Just 50 years ago, young Episcopalian women could be either nuns or nothings. And, praise God, Jo did not become a nun.

In fact, yesterday was the 49th anniversary of the first ordination of women in the Episcopal Church. Then two years later the General Convention of the Episcopal Church formally approved the ordination of women, effective January 1, 1977. Then it still it took until 1989 for the Church to consecrate the first woman bishop.

Changing the rules, however, never evokes the same instantaneous change in the culture. And sadly, the culture of a Church can be a more insidious barrier than any written rule or regulation.

Becoming a priest as a woman in the Episcopal Church in the last 50 years typically has been an uphill slog, complete with large portions of injustice and imposing arrays of arbitrary obstacles. We are historically, after all, the church of white male introverts. Consequently, women - and particularly female extroverts - often have confronted a more skeptical, lest we say hostile, environment, in the ordination process, from the moment it begins in the parish through graduation from seminary and ordination. How would I know this? How could I not know this!

Jo is one of only two female extroverts I am personally aware of who it made through the ordination process. It was infuriating enough that people readily assumed that she had followed me in my pursuit of my call, when precisely the opposite was true. But at one point Jo was even advised to appear submissive and certainly never

hold her head higher or shine her light brighter than mine. Mind you this was in the 21st century. A female colleague who had struggled for nearly 20 years in the process to be ordained, warned Jo to not prostitute herself to survive the process to get ordained. Jo also embraced the sage advice of our pastoral counseling professor who reminded her that seminary was designed to turn us into the vague, oblong blobs, and that she never should succumb to that. And she did not.

And speaking of seminary, when our female theology professor was denied tenure and essentially forced out, a few fellow seminarians, and I use "fellow" intentionally, broke into "ding, dong, the witch is dead." In a seminary where the faculty force-fed us liberation theology. In the 21st century. That anyone should have been expected to sacrifice their identity and integrity to get ordained is appalling and pathetic.

And we wonder why the pews are empty. Because the research of pollsters and sociologists, as well as the experience of many congregations, confirms that parishes led by extroverts are more likely to grow.

And the stain-glass ceiling hardly shatters upon ordination. When young female priests are interviewed for positions in the church, they often have been asked about marital or family status (including pregnancy or childcare plans) ... in the 21st century.

So much so that the 2018 General Convention amended the canons of the Episcopal Church to provide that

No one shall be denied rights, status or access to an equal place in the life, worship, governance, or employment of this Church because of ... marital or family status (including pregnancy or child care plans)... (2)

Just five years ago.

We also might compare compensation as between male and female priests in the Episcopal Church. And we would find that in 2020, the last year for which we have data, the gap between male and female priests is roughly \$10,000.00, even accounting for church size and years of experience.

And, let's face it, if the profiles of parishes seeking new priests could say it, they would state a preference for a 35 year old white male introvert with 10 years' experience, a 32-year old wife, who plays guitar and carries around a syllabus for Sunday school, makes great cookies, and will otherwise raise their four fair-haired children, and keep her mouth shut, except to sing in church, on Sunday. Now they will never say it except sotto voce in the hallway of the search committee meeting or, better yet, in the parking lot. But that's what they want. And there is no real mechanism for enforcing the canons and rooting out this sort of cultural bias.

Often it has taken experiencing the ministry of a woman priest to cure this myopic preference. So often when Jo has led a church, the next priest they called has been a woman.

But times are a changing. Today, 40 per cent of the priests in the Episcopal Church are women. The dean of our seminary is a woman, in fact, one of our New Testament professors. The Church elected a female presiding bishop in 2006. And today, the Episcopal Church counts 46 women among its 126 active bishops.(3)

Let's remain mindful that the Church grew to what it is today from a handful of apostles in Jerusalem, male and female. After all, Scripture denotes Mary Magdalen as an apostle, and if we look hard enough, we will find numerous women who were instrumental in the growth and development of the early Church, despite some very patriarchal Biblical redactions.

So let's consider where we are today. The Church is reforming and reinventing itself. It's an "all hands on deck" moment. Where would we be if we excluded or marginalized over half the population from serving the Church in ordained ministry? And how would we be perceived?

On the afternoon before Michael Curry was installed as presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church on November 1, 2015, an event Jo and I were privileged and extremely fortunate to attend, we were wandering our old neighborhood near DuPont Circle in Washington, D.C., trying to decide where to eat a late lunch. It was Halloween, and we were both in our clerical attire. About 10 or 15 feet behind us as we strolled up 20th Street, N.W., was a young couple pushing a baby carriage. We could hear them whispering, "Are they really priests or is it Halloween costumes?" Well, we had to turn around and engage them. Yes, we are priests. Yes, Jo is, too.

The parents were a mixed marriage, Episcopalian and Roman Catholic. And we so struck by what they said next..."I think we will be Episcopalians ... so our daughter can have the same opportunities a son could have in the Church."

Ahhhh...Men!

(1) Feminist Interpretation at 449.

(2) Canon I.17.5.

(3) "House of Bishops more diverse than ever ... " Episcopal News Service, May 16, 2023,

[https:// www.episcopalnewsservice.org/ 2023/05/16 /house-of-bishops-more-diverse-than-ever-with-addition-of-women-people-of-color-lgbtq-bishops/](https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/2023/05/16/house-of-bishops-more-diverse-than-ever-with-addition-of-women-people-of-color-lgbtq-bishops/) (accessed July 25, 2023).