



First United Church of Oak Park

The Divine Feminine

Proverbs 8:1-11, 22-31

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I had a bit of a non-traditional childhood as it relates to the church. My father is an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ and served the church his entire career. Yet my Sunday school experience was defined mostly by a smattering of days in congregations where my dad was guest preaching and I would drop in for a Sunday, essentially at random. A person might look at my upbringing and think I was totally unchurched. But that's not really true. The seminary where my dad taught, that was our church. Our family friends at whose homes we would visit for thanksgiving were theologians like Ted Jennings, whose razor wit and tobacco-rich smile challenged the minds of generations of pastors. My brother and I grew up playing with the children of renowned scholar, activist, and murder mystery author Susan Thistlethwaite. The house we would stay at in Wisconsin with a ping-pong table in the basement was the home of Bob Mutton, the long-serving Conference Minister for the Wisconsin Conference of the UCC. My childhood was infused with church, though not in a traditional sense.

I want to share one such moment from my childhood I can remember quite vividly. Reaching deep into the back of the cluttered pantry of my memory, out comes a lesson that my dad taught me about God. We were in the car, a Volkswagen Quantum station wagon with leatherette seats that stuck to my thighs in summer and door locks that looked like black plastic golf tees. I was a child prone to asking many questions, and on this occasion I was asking about how we prayed before dinner. We would pray the Lord's Prayer, but sometimes we started, "Our Father who art in heaven," and sometimes we started, "Our Mother who art in heaven," and I asked my dad, "Why do we do that?" After considering, he said, "God isn't just a man like I'm a man. God is also a woman, like your mother is a woman. God isn't limited like we are. So when we sometimes think of God as our father, and sometimes think of God as our mother, it helps us to respect God and it helps us respect women, too."

I wasn't in Sunday school very much, but I had a pretty good private tutor.

I carried my dad's early theology lesson with me into my adult faith. But though I believed my dad was right about God not being exclusively masculine, I figured that the Bible probably represented God exclusively as being like a man, and that any understanding of God as being like a woman would require me to fudge the numbers a bit.

So I was honestly surprised to find that not only was my dad correct, but that the Bible itself supported what he said. The idea that God isn't exclusively a man appears in greatest Technicolor splendor in the most unusual of places: in the Book of Proverbs. I did not expect to find any feminine language for God in the Book of Proverbs, because as the name implies, Proverbs is a collection of wisdom, aphorisms such as:

"A generous person will be enriched, and one who gives water will get water."

"Better to meet a she-bear robbed of its cubs than to confront a fool immersed in folly," that kind of thing.

It's practical wisdom about how to succeed in life, and there are hundreds and hundreds of these sayings. So what does this have to do with a feminine image of God? Well, the Book of Proverbs is about wisdom. Here I need to pause and do a bit of Hebrew. The Hebrew word for wisdom is *chochmah*, and when it is applied to a person it means something like technical skill, but to adequately capture it you need to combine the ideas of intelligence, logic, specialized knowledge, and the whole of scientific endeavor, and the art of influencing people. An auto mechanic has wisdom about engines and a doctor has wisdom about the human body and a pilot has wisdom about flying airplanes. Wisdom in the Bible is understanding the laws that undergird how the world works, and using that understanding to shape the world and control the unfolding of events. That is *chochmah* in a general sense.

But the Book of Proverbs goes deeper, and explains where wisdom comes from. Wisdom itself is a part of the fabric of the universe. Wisdom is a divine being, Wisdom is like a person who assisted God in the act of creation. The existence of wisdom precedes the creation of the world, and it is wisdom through whom and with whom and according to whose design God created the world.

Wisdom's fingerprints are all over creation, and wisdom is woven into the fabric of existence. More than woven in, actually, wisdom is the weaver of existence who was present with God during the weaving of the world. Proverbs 8: "Wisdom cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice. At the busiest corner she cries out: Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth, then I was beside God, like a master worker."

The choreographer of the dance of the stars and comets, the architect of the social order of bees, wisdom is the judge whose ruling established that the laws of physics shall everywhere and eternally be the same. Wisdom is the divine being who designed the laws governing the world. So to be wise is to grasp those laws, and to use that understanding to shape the world and control the unfolding of events.

Oh, one other thing. Wisdom is a woman. Without any anxiety at all, the Book of Proverbs describes there being a divine woman, a master worker beside God in creation. At the first, before the beginning, she was with God. It was she who sounded the deeps and sunk the foundations of the earth in immutable law. If I am to know God, as God really is, then I must know God as she is presented in Proverbs.

God, the divine feminine, Lady Wisdom in all her glory, she offers gift upon gift upon gift. An understanding of how the world works, using that understanding to shape the world and control the unfolding of events. Wisdom! God the divine feminine, Lady Wisdom in her glory, offers humanity intelligence, logic, specialized knowledge, and the whole of scientific endeavor, and the art of influencing people. The auto mechanic with their wisdom about engines, the doctor with their wisdom about the human body, the pilot whose wisdom about flying airplanes jets across the heavens. These are the gifts of God, in all her glory.

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Or maybe my dad said it best after all in that summer car ride: "God isn't just a man like I'm a man and like you will someday be a man. God is also a woman, like your mother is a woman. God isn't limited like we are. So when we sometimes think of God as our father, and sometimes think of God as our mother, it helps us to respect God and it helps us respect women, too."

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