



I Don't Care What Other People Think ... Too Bad

TEXT
Ezekiel 36:22-30

October 27, 2019 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

This is how it happened to me. I was sitting in a class on Old Testament prophets in 1983. We came to a passage tucked into the 11th chapter of Hosea. *When Israel was a child, I loved him. It was I who taught them to walk. I lifted them to my cheek. I fed them.*

Dr. Jim Mays started talking about God teaching a child to walk and how she leaned down with outstretched arms to let her child grasp her fingers.

It rocked my world. It was the first time that I had a seminary professor refer to God as "she." I knew Jesus said to pray to "our Father." I knew that all through the Bible, God is addressed as "he." But Dr. Mays said no man in the ancient world would have taught children to walk or nursed them. No, it was women who did this. This was a feminine image of God in the Bible — just erased my board.

Today's sermon is not about what we call God, but let me say a word about this: Does it matter if we use masculine or feminine language to describe God? Yes and no. All of our language is inadequate. We are talking about God, and not

even the poets have invented the vocabulary to adequately describe God. But the parental language is not intended to assign to God gender. God is not a boy. The parental language is intended to describe belonging — relationship. God is one who claims us as God's own children.

So, father does that. Why mother? In short, history. The reason "father" language was chosen in the first place is not because God is more fatherlike, but because human culture has a long history of treating men with more dignity than women. That's why, for a long time, men and only men were politicians. For a long time, men and only men were doctors. For a long time, men and only men were preachers. We are wiser now. As we grow in wisdom, our language should reflect that growth.

Now, some who live as if we knew all we needed to know yesterday will call this political correctness. But it is more just living out the perspective that seems more faithful in a new day. Faith always pulls us to the future.

In my own experience, I have found the prophets, even from a long time ago, to teach

that God may not be who we assumed she was. There is always more to know. And the truth is, anyone who is attentive to circumstances of your life, of the world, and also attentive to the wisdom of the tradition, is going to change and grow in your understanding of God. This never ends — which is to say, 1983 was not the last time I had scripture "erase my board." It's happened often, and Ezekiel is pushing me today.

So, let me get to the sermon.

Ezekiel was part of the brain drain that the Babylonians imposed on Judah. So, the most significant crisis and therefore the most significant theological question of Ancient Israel was this: Why did they get removed from the land that God gave to them? In 721 BCE, the northern kingdom of Israel was overrun by the Assyrians. The way the Assyrians managed conquered people was to scatter them across the Assyrian empire, mixing cultures and languages, with the assumption that mixing them all up would keep them weak and easier for the Assyrians to control.

One hundred and fifty years later, the Babylonians were the shaping power in the Middle

East, and they overthrew the remainder of Israel, claiming the southern portion called Judah. The Babylonians managed conquered people very differently from the Assyrians. Rather than scatter them, the Babylonians brought the best and the brightest back to Babylon. The assumption was that if they could bring the strength of other nations to their capital, it would make them strong. The problem is that managing conquered people never goes as you think it will.

Ezekiel was among the brain drain marched back to Babylon. It was there that Ezekiel addressed the theological question in Ancient Israel's history: Why were we taken from the land that God gave to us? Did God fail? Did God change God's mind? What happened?

In short, Israel admitted God didn't fail; we did. Israel wasn't so much overthrown as they rather crumbled from the inside. They lost their moral compass, set truth aside, placed personal gain over community health, and they just crumbled from the inside. Judgment, as we said last week, resulted from failing to follow the ways of God. Ezekiel agreed with this assessment. But that wasn't the end of the story. Ezekiel made it clear that there would be a new exodus, just like God brought them out of the land of Egypt to the Promised Land. So too, at this low point for God's people, God would bring them out of the land of Babylon. They were go-

ing home. It would be a display of grace.

But why? That is what Ezekiel wanted to teach them. There were several reasons. One we recognized last Sunday. God can't stop loving God's people. As Jeremiah said, "I cannot let go of my people."

It's a comforting word and one we need to hear.

But there is more. Ezekiel says one of the reasons God will bring Israel back home: "It is not for your sake ... but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned." God said to Israel, *I will bring you home to show the nations that I am a God of grace because you have damaged my reputation.* Wow!

Last spring, when I was preparing for this series, I came to these words of Ezekiel, and they struck me with something I had not thought of, but something that seems undeniably true.

If I understand the text, Ezekiel is saying, how we live influences how others understand God. You know, sometimes our thoughts of God are focused on what God does for us, or what God should do for us, or what we want God to do for us. But there is another side to that relationship. God depends on the church, the Christian, to show the love of God in this world. And when we fail at that, people not only think less of us, they think less of God.

I don't care what other people think. I don't remember the

issue de jure, but that was my teenage response to my mother when she suggested my behavior might be misconstrued by others. They might misunderstand me. I announced, "I don't care what other people think." It wasn't a phrase original to me. No, I had heard others I admired say such things. It was incredibly empowering. I was announcing that I am my own person. I don't need approval from anyone. I march to the beat of my own drummer. Oh, it felt great.

It wasn't true. And more than that, it wasn't faithful. You can't be careless about what your neighbor thinks while at the same time loving your neighbor. This is what I mean.

Years ago I got a call from a student at the high school. He was a journalist with the school paper, and he wanted to ask me some questions. Fred Phelps' family had protested at the school, and he wanted to talk to me about that. He asked if I believed in scripture. I told him I had learned a lot from this old book, and that we read it together every Sunday.

He asked a few more questions, and then he asked, "Do you think God wants you to hate the same people they think God hates?" Whoa. I had no idea, but this bright, respectful, inquisitive young man assumed that I thought the same way Fred Phelps thought. I said, "I don't think God hates people. Christians do sometimes, when they fail to live like Christians. But God doesn't hate your friends." I got off the phone

and was embarrassed for the church.

There are so many ways the church has embarrassed herself over the generations. There have been too many times we have assumed it was more important for our neighbors to be Christian than to be Christian to our neighbor. We can't afford to be casual about how others see that.

Now I know this. We at Village will never be pure because we can mess things up with the best of them. But I also know this: How we are as a church matters, not just to us, but to God.

So, I am grateful to you for being a church of signature mission who says to students in Wyandotte County, "We may not know your name, but God does; so we will support the work of Avenue of Life because as people of God, it is who we are called to be."

It is why I am so grateful that you will participate in Be the Church Night/Day, and do small acts of kindness to be Christian to people who are in need.

It is why I am grateful so many of you took time to read to children who need another positive adult leader in their life.

I am grateful that you carried bread and juice to homebound folks — some of whom struggle to remember what they had for lunch, but they remember that that bread is the body of Christ, and they remember every word of the Lord's Prayer.

I am grateful that you recognize our faith is not for our benefit alone, but because we believe, it should be a good thing for our community — and that can only be the case when we care about what they see in us.

I could go on, but I am grateful for Ezekiel's reminder: How we live is not just for us; it's about God's reputation in Kansas City. So, it matters.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.