

I. Advanced Organizer.

A. **August 18, 1920 was an important day in U.S. History. Who knows why?**

1. It was the day that the **19th Amendment was adopted, securing women the right to vote**. This was a hard fought victory for the suffragettes, after years of advocacy and organizing, which required not only the commitment and sacrifice of women, but the partnership of men.
2. **Elizabeth Cady Stanton** and other women first testified before the Senate in support of what was commonly known as the “**Anthony Amendment**”, after activist **Susan B. Anthony**, not in 1920, but **42 years earlier in 1878**. The initial bill sat in committee for nearly a decade until it was finally brought forward for a vote. The senate rejected the amendment when it was first proposed in a 16 to 34 vote in 1887.
3. **Following this major setback came 3 decades of arduous organizing and making the case for women’s suffrage**. The leaders of the movement took a state by state strategy, focusing on getting women the vote in individual states before trying again for a constitutional amendment. In 1910 and 1911 serious headway was made as Washington State and California adopted women’s suffrage, with many other western states following suit. And while the progress was encouraging, when the amendment came up for a vote again before the Senate in 1914, again it was rejected.
4. **By 1918, the leaders of the movement had secured the support of the President of the United States, Woodrow Wilson, who urged the Senate to adopt the measure**. But in spite of that important boost, the bill failed by 2 votes. In February of the next year it was put forward again and failed by one. There was desire to get this done before the 1920 presidential election and so once again the bill was put forward in June 1919, and after considerable discussion, it was finally passed by the Senate. But Constitutional Amendments must also be ratified by all the states. This process took over a year, with Southern Democrats being the most challenging holdouts. When the final state to sign on, Tennessee, ratified the amendment, August 18, 1920, women in the United States had finally secured the right to vote, nearly 150 years after the nation’s founding, **55 years after the 13th amendment was passed to free black slaves, and 50 years after the 15th amendment was passed guaranteeing the vote to male citizens of all races and ethnicities**. It was a long, hard fought victory for equality for women. One which helped lay the groundwork for an election like the one we had in 2018 in which more women were sent to Washington as representatives to Congress than we’ve had in our history.

B. So here’s a question for you. **It’s been almost a hundred years since the 19th amendment was finally adopted. Today, if men - as a group - wanted to take away women’s right to vote, could they? What do you think?**

1. Perhaps it would be good to reflect on how far women have come in entering the seats of power to make that decision. As I already mentioned, last year’s mid-term election was notable for its record turnout, and as has often been the case in recent years, women made up the numerical majority of voters. The election was celebrated for its success in electing the most women to congress that we’ve yet had. And yet, even with our record-breaking level of representation, **women still only make up 23% of the House, 25% of the Senate, 33% of the Supreme Court, and have never held the highest office in the land**.

C. As social scientist, Robin DiAngelo, points out, despite our discomfort with this reality, we have to recognize that **if men as a group wanted to, they could indeed take away**

women's right to vote, or block women for running for office. Because despite our gains, men as a group, still hold the vast majority of the power. This is the definition of oppression.

1. Oppression goes beyond prejudice and individual interactions. **Oppression involves pervasive, historical, political relationships between social groups. It includes prejudice plus power.** Men and women may have held historic prejudices against one another, but in societies that place men in power, known as Patriarchies, **only men have had the group power to oppress women.** In the forty plus year fight for women to gain the vote, the vote could only be gained by gaining the support of men. Men were the only ones with the power to grant that right, and statistically, men still a hundred years later have the power to take it away.
2. **I'm not saying this as a call to fear;** I live in hope that a majority of men in power are not interested in taking away women's right to vote; but this thought exercise brings up a reality that feels all too real right now. **The oppression of patriarchy is still very potent.**
3. **It's a fight that is very live right now, as states are mounting new challenges to reproductive rights.** Whatever your personal feelings about abortion are, reproductive rights are clearly issues that impact women most directly, and yet, men still hold the vast majority of the power in determining what rights women should have over their reproductive systems. In Alabama, a state where women make up 51% of the population, an extreme law was passed this week criminalizing abortion by a governing body that is 85% male. **The patriarchy is alive and well.**
4. **Patriarchy is a mode of oppression many of us have identified and reject.** But are we aware of what lies behind patriarchy? **Can we really be rid of patriarchy if we don't know what feeds it?**

II. **This is the second teaching in a new series called "Smashing Idols"**, where we're looking at the ancient practice of idolatry, and considering if our capacity to make convincing idols has just evolved. I'm suggesting that perhaps idols in our day look less like statues we carve and more like the way we elevate certain perspectives, or you could say frames and lenses through which we view the world. Perhaps this is our way of ordering our reality and making the world work for us, just like the ancients tried to do with statues, instead of entrusting ourselves to a transcendent God.

A. Today I want to focus on a way of viewing the world that has had powerful influence throughout history and I would argue is what feeds the oppressive system we call patriarchy.

This view is known as Androcentrism.

1. What's androcentrism?

a) According to Wikipedia - **Androcentrism is the practice, conscious or otherwise, of placing a masculine point of view at the center of one's worldview, culture, and history, thereby culturally marginalizing femininity.**

- (1) translation; **androcentrism is the idea that what is culturally considered masculine is normal and good, and what is culturally considered feminine is other or less then.**
- (2) Androcentrism was the worldview that permeated the United States and made it so difficult for women to secure the vote. Androcentrism meant that doctors used male bodies as their reference points. It meant that academics in our nation's leading universities researched questions and interpreted findings that reinforced the idea that men were innately more capable of leadership. Psychiatrists based definitions of mental health on the men they worked with. Historians exclusively told the stories of thoughts, interests and actions of men.

(3) And the effects of such pervasive longstanding androcentrism, means that the centering of male-ness is still with us.

(a) Here in the Bay Area, the tech industry is booming, but its version of success has very male flavor to it. Emily Chang, author of the recent book *Brotopia* describes things this way: *"Silicon Valley companies have largely been created in the image of their mostly young, mostly male, mostly childless founders."*

Expectations of heroic long hours assume the employees aren't concerned with children at home. Companies that encourage work related trips to strip clubs and Silicon Valley sex parties make women feel even less welcome, and so it should be no surprise that they only make up 25% of the workforce and leave jobs in computers and engineering at twice the rate as men do.

(b) And of course it goes beyond tech. The recognition in film that the **majority of our leading protagonists are male**, is a result of androcentrism. And many women who are succeeding in classically male dominated spaces recognize their success is still within the frameworks of androcentrism. **As they adopt to more classically masculine ways of interacting or presenting themselves, and minimizing overly "feminine" characteristics, they have more success career wise.**

(4) This James Franco meme illustrates it well. (slide) - *"Girls can wear jeans and cut their hair short, wear shorts and boots because it's ok to be a boy. But for a boy to look like a girl is degrading, because you think being a girl is degrading."* This shows the insidious way Androcentrism works and perhaps why trans women especially are so vulnerable and subject to violence.

2. I don't think we can deny the power of androcentrism in our culture. The question I'm interested in as people of faith, is **how has androcentrism affected our experience of faith?** Has androcentrism created an idol that keeps us from seeing the true God clearly, and worshipping an image of God that is not authentic, instead.

a) **I believe it has created a powerful idol, and we need look no further to understand that, then to examine the way that most of us have been socialized to think of the gender of God.**

B. If you are like me, in church you've long been told that **God is beyond gender.**

1. **God is neither male nor female. God is both/and.** God is above and beyond. Male and Female are both made in the image of God, as we see in Genesis 1:27.

a) ***"So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them."***

2. But while that has long been affirmed, **in the same breath, it's negated in all of the language we use about God.** Masculine persons are the images used to describe God: God the Father. God the Son. God as Lord. God as King. God as Shepherd. God as husband. Again and again God may be beyond gender, but somehow god is a He.

3. Theologian Elizabeth Johnson believes **this itself is a form of idolatry.** A God that has consistently been affirmed throughout Jewish and Christian thought as being beyond imagining, beyond any human conception, is then consistently represented simplistically and reduced to maleness. She says it this way:

a) ***"Normative conceptualization of God in analogy with male reality alone is the equivalent of the graven image, a finite representation being taken for and worshiped as the whole."***

What is violated is both the creature's limitation and the unknowable transcendence of the true God."

4. Let me translate: **when we cast God as a man, we forget how limited men are to represent God, and we forget how big, different, and mysterious our God is.** Instead, we worship an idol and we call it God.
- C. Let's start by considering the second of those points: **to cast God as a man means we forget how mysterious God is.**
 1. **Throughout our tradition and our texts there has been an emphasis on the holiness of God.** What does that mean? It means "otherness", "uniqueness". The Divine is something totally different than we can imagine. All of our words for God will always fall short because they cannot ever truly name this sacred creative, loving force we call God. As the early Christian thinker Augustine pointed out: **"it is easier to say what God is not than what God is: if we have understood, then what we have understood is not God."**
 2. This is why God did not want God's followers to try to create images and worship them. I believe God's call to not create idols was a call to not only to turn their attention elsewhere, but also **not to try to reduce God to something they could master.**
 3. Instead God called God's followers to simply worship this God as Yahweh, meaning "I Am". Worship this deity not as male or female, but simply the God that exists. Beyond everything else that has been created in time, this Divine Force we call God simply is.
- D. **But God as a Force that's Unimaginable and not ever truly Knowable is hard to connect with.** And so we have the reality that this God uses limited signs and symbols, human languages and culturally bound metaphors to try to communicate with us; to connect with us.
 1. **Speaking to a culture steeped in androcentrism and patriarchy, many of these signs and metaphors that we have recorded were masculine.** Is that a surprise? An androcentric group of primarily men trying to connect with an unknowable deity, come to understand that God through the lenses that they see the world through and write it down and we call it our Bible. And then androcentric men interpret those texts for us for centuries, as priests, bishops and pastors. God as a loving parent is understood as God as a loving Father. God as a family member who is with us and for us is a brother. God as one to be worshipped for God's ultimate capacity to hold all of creation in God's metaphorical hands is worshiped as King. **These representations are not surprising, and they're not even wrong as metaphors. They're simply incomplete.**
 2. Yet the idol of androcentrism makes it hard for us to say this out loud. **Those of us who are steeped in Christian tradition may feel weird not using male pronouns for God.** It was a couple of years ago, the first time we had this Smashing Idols conversation, that I first really examined the effect that androcentrism had had on my own spirituality. I recognized that I had normalized the maleness of God. I had normalized **acknowledging that God is beyond gender but imagining God as a heterosexual cisgender male kind of genderless God.** I had normalized that through the songs I've sung, the Scriptures I've read, the prayers I've been taught to pray, the sermons I've heard, and the sermons I've preached.
 3. **I had normalized it as I had been rewarded for using male language of God and been warned off from challenging that.** I remember being asked to give a teaching in a church setting not long after I had become a mom. **And fresh off the experience of childbirth, I was filled with wonder and a passion to talk about what I had learned of God through birth.** Birth was an extremely spiritual experience for me. Laboring and delivering without pain medication, I came to the end of myself, but I also felt a profound unity with the

Divine in the midst of it. Delivering my son, I had the profound experience of bring forth life through great pain. I understood a love that costs something. I understood the power of the cross in a way I never had.

- a) **And yet as I prepared my teaching, I was warned not to speak too directly any comparisons between myself as a birthing mother and God.** Meditating on the motherness of God was threatening to the Father-ness of God, and so it had to be discouraged. But how many times have I heard male pastors compare their experiences of fatherhood with the fatherhood of God? Never has anyone called that inappropriate.
4. I think if you asked those pastors who rewarded me for keeping my metaphors male, they would say they're trying to keep from misrepresenting God. But I don't think it's the image of the divine they're protecting. I think it's the image of a particular god they've created, one that looks a lot like them.
5. I say that as **a female pastor, preached to throughout my life primarily by men, formed by theology predominantly written by men, who has come to believe that the exclusively male conception of God is actually an idol, steeped in androcentrism. And it is a damaging idol, one that has been used to bolster systems of patriarchy for thousands of years.**
 - a) This idol has told me that I have less capacity to reflect God's image, less authority to lead, less ability to interpret God's word, less wisdom to impart. This idol kept me for years from believing that ministry was even worth considering as a vocation, because this idol told me my offerings would always be limited by my gender.
 - b) **I also stand here recognizing that I'm not even sure what the full answer is for how to move forward.** What are we to do with a Bible that employs so many male metaphors of God? Do we cease to use those metaphors? What pronouns are appropriate? What does it mean that Jesus, who we call the revelation of God came not just as any human being, but as a particular human being that was male? I don't think there's an easy answer to these questions, and I think it's a conversation that we're opening up and it will continue to evolve.
- E. But I do have one clear answer that we can begin with, and it has to do with the first problem Elizabeth Johnson identified - that men are limited in their capacity to represent God. **I believe we get closer to seeing God when we are willing to represent God with both male and female imagery, recognizing that both are simply metaphor and not actually naming who God is. (repeat this)** The best part is: **We don't have to make this stuff up. God does it God's self.**
 1. While yes, the texts that make up our Bible were composed in cultures that were certainly androcentric, just the same, surprising imagery of God as female is still there. It's there throughout our texts, both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament.
 2. In Isaiah 42, God stunningly does of God's self the thing I was told not to do. God is portrayed as a laboring woman. But how many of us have heard this passage boldly preached from the pulpit? Isaiah proclaims the word of God saying this:
 - a) ***“For a long time I have kept silent,
I have been quiet and held myself back.
But now, like a woman in childbirth,
I cry out, I gasp and pant.
15 I will lay waste the mountains and hills
and dry up all their vegetation;***

*I will turn rivers into islands
and dry up the pools.
16 I will lead the blind by ways they have not known,
along unfamiliar paths I will guide them;
I will turn the darkness into light before them
and make the rough places smooth.
These are the things I will do;
I will not forsake them.
17 But those who trust in idols,
who say to images, 'You are our gods,'
will be turned back in utter shame."* (Isaiah 42:14-17)

- (1) Here Isaiah shows us that **God is a laboring mother who will not be silenced and cannot be stopped as she makes a way for her children to come into life.** But strikingly, those who will not worship her as she is, ***those who insist on worshipping a mere image and not God in God's fulness cannot*** enter that life she is offering.
3. This passage is not alone. Elsewhere God is portrayed in scripture as **a nursing mother**. God is portrayed as **a hen gathering her chicks**. The prophet Hosea describes God as a mama bear who ferociously protects her cubs and is fierce with anyone who tries to hurt them. Jesus himself at one time uses a pair of metaphors in parables to speak of how God feels when the lost are found: one is a male metaphor, a shepherd finding a lost sheep. The **other is a female one, a woman celebrating because she has found a lost coin**. In another parable, Jesus speaks of God's kingdom spreading being like the yeast in dough that a woman is kneading. **God in the metaphor is that woman, working the dough and allowing the kingdom to spread.** And this isn't even touching on the feminine conceptions of **the Holy Spirit as well as Wisdom that we have throughout the bible**.
 4. There is a rich history in the Hebrew Bible and in other Jewish texts of the era, of seeing **Wisdom personified as female. The word is Sophia in Greek**, and for many early Christians, that female personification has been seen to be the 2nd person of the trinity, the person who would come in the flesh as a man named Jesus. **From this view, Jesus holds within his male body the feminine wisdom known as Sophia.** Jesus, while being historically male, is not defined by his male-ness and brings the conceptions of male and female together.
 5. Likewise many words used in the bible for the Holy Spirit are feminine, again speaking against an exclusively male view of God. Many of us know that the Holy Spirit in the gospels is represented as a dove, descending from the heavens and alighting on Jesus at his baptism. But what we haven't been told was that this symbol of the dove in the ancient world was connected with the goddess Aphrodite. **To see the Spirit expressed as a dove communicated to the people of Jesus' day that the Spirit was a distinctly feminine kind of sacred power. She was Sacred Feminine.**
 6. **When I first began researching feminine imagery of the divine in the Bible, one of my favorite discoveries was one I'd never even come across in six years of seminary.** Throughout the Hebrew Bible, the people of God would speak of God's compassionate care for Israel. The word often used for **compassion or mercy in the Hebrew Bible is rachum**. (Ra-coom). What most of us who don't speak Hebrew miss, is that this word also refers to the **mother's womb**. The affection, the mercy, the compassion that God has

for God's people is being compared to how a mother regards the child in her womb. According to the Hebrew Bible, **God holds us in a womb of affection and considers us with that level of intimacy and connection to herself.**

7. This is the exact term being used when **David, the great King of Israel**, a male example to a patriarchal culture if there ever was one, and a hero of the faith for his heart connection with God, **prays in Psalm 51**. After David's great sin with Bathsheba, a time when he abused his power, mistreating a woman by taking her as property when she was not his to take, the essence of patriarchy, David repents and calls upon the womb of God for mercy.

a) Psalm 51:1-2

***"Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion (your womb-love)
blot out my transgressions.
Wash away all my iniquity
and cleanse me from my sin."***

David appeals to God as Mother, and receives his Mother's mercy.

8. *First time I meditated on Mama God...and also pushback I've gotten for beginning to employ feminine metaphors in liturgy, songs, and the other ways we talk about God in community*
9. Dr. Christina Cleveland, has been on her own journey of connecting with the Sacred Feminine, specifically through a womanist lens, which is the name generally used for Black feminism. This Lent she did a series of reflections based on the Last Words of Christ that she called *Christ our Black Mother*. After announcing the series, one of her followers on social media posed this question: "Soooo...do you literally believe Jesus was a black woman, and that God is female? Or is this just a creative abstract idea...? Trying to understand."
 - a) Christina responded: *"I don't tend to think literally when it comes to the Divine. I think metaphor is all we have, and that is mysteriously plenty."*
 - b) Metaphor is all we have. "God" is a symbol. Any way we name the divine is never literal. It's always metaphor, a naming of that which is beyond all names.
10. So **I believe this is one of the ways we begin to counter the idol of androcentrism**. We don't need to do away with all masculine metaphors for God, but **we do need to celebrate both kinds of metaphors and proclaim them boldly**. We hold up that yes, God can be represented as a man, but also as a woman. We need to recognize both, as well as God as non-binary, to hold in tension that **all of these images are only images, they are only signs and symbols, they are not God's essence**.
11. The truth is even on an androcentric patriarchal world, God has always honored herself being represented with feminine imagery. But at the same time, patterns have clearly emerged over time in our tradition, where male teachers of the faith obscure, diminish, or actively suppress these feminine sacred images, and so they become lost to us. What a tragedy! How many women of faith have suffered throughout the ages because they've been deprived of the dignity of being full image-bearers of the Divine? How many have left the church altogether because they have believed there is no real place to celebrate the feminine in our spirituality? And how many men have been corrupted by the lie as well?

- F. The truth is **Androcentrism doesn't just harm women, who are made to believe that they are not full image bearers of God. It harms men as well.** Toxic masculinity is the way this idol produces in men a **false sense of what it means to be a man**, elevating certain characteristics over others and calling them good: characteristics often connected to strength and power, even dominance, while the characteristics that are generally more connected to emotional sensitivity, cooperative care, and affection are to be suppressed and called wrong. I believe **the shattering of the idol of androcentrism and the dismantling of sexism are necessary for men, women, genderqueer, cisgender and transgender folks all to find flourishing and recognize in themselves the beauty of God's creation and the womb-like love of their creator.**
1. All of us are created in the image of God. Black and white. Latinx and Asian. Queer and Straight. Male and Female. May we continue to be a part of the revealing of God's presence in our midst, and may we turn from the false idols to cast God in our own image, but journey together to see God more fully for who God is. Amen.