

Talking Cents

August 2014

Talking Cents is an ecumenical group charged by the Anglican Diocesan Council to promote an alternative to current economic and political thought, and to encourage debate within the Church. Ministry Units are encouraged to distribute these articles.

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Seeking to incarnate a vulnerable God (2)

In February of this year I offered an article naming God as a vulnerable God and concluding that our Christian calling is to actively seek to incarnate this God. In that article, I began by reflecting on my five years in South Africa, on experiences of vulnerability and on how we, as Pakeha, seek to diminish our exposure to vulnerability. I argued that the traditional God-imaging that helped us reduce our sense of vulnerability has contributed to huge historical global theft because it legitimated power over others and over their land and resources.

I drew on retired Canadian Anglican priest Bob Purdy and his 2013 work *Without Guarantee: in search of a vulnerable God* to present a case for God's inherent vulnerability. If God is a God of love then God is a vulnerable God. Our human experience tells us this. To love means to choose to be vulnerable for the sake of the one loved. This is the true nature of God and we, Pakeha, and our cultural cousins around the world, are called to incarnate God's vulnerable love so that justice is possible.

This August article focuses on our God-imaging. I draw on feminist theologians to approach God's inherent vulnerability from a different starting point. The essential purpose is the same as the February article – to name God in a way that promotes a conversion to justice.

God-imaging is a very human activity. However we understand the process of revelation, we, as limited humans, rely on metaphors and images to name our experience of God. This experience is always one that is mediated in and through our engagement with our world. Our metaphors are conditioned by the socio-cultural and political context and imagination within which we live (Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language*, 1982). Our God-imaging is as much about our own identity as it is about the identity of God, for our God-imaging is actually “our ultimate point of reference” (Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: the Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, 1992). Elizabeth Johnson argues that this point of reference “is never

neutral in its efforts, but expresses and moulds a community's bedrock convictions and actions” (*Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God*, 2007). Thus, our God-imaging shapes the way we look at the world, the way we act toward others and the way we create institutions and structures.

And because we are humans, our God-imaging will always be limited, and can even be wrong. Purdy names that our dominant, traditional God-imaging is our “earliest and most destructive error of all.” He is not alone in arguing this. In fact, for a number of decades already, feminist theologians have been questioning the metaphors naming God as all powerful father, king and lord. Feminist theologians challenge the attribution of absolute power to God and its subsequent legitimating of human imperial/patriarchal power.

Elizabeth Johnson, for example, names the dominant imaging of God is as “a monarch at the very peak of the pyramid of being ... [who] stands at the summit of hierarchical power, reinforcing structures of authority in society, church, and family” (Johnson, *Quest for the Living God*). Sharon Welch argues “[t]he idea of an omnipotent and sovereign God ... assumes that absolute power can be a good.” She further argues that the theological attribution of unlimited power to God “leads to the legitimation of imperial power” and to the legitimation of “human coercive power” (*A Feminist Ethic of Risk: Revised Edition*, 2000). Johnson claims that this reduces God to an “idol ... to the fantasy of an infinitely ruling man.” The God-image that prevails is that God is “as an all-powerful white man” (Johnson, *Quest for the Living God*).

But this is not the God to whom Jesus witnessed. In Jesus “we glimpse a merciful love that knows no bounds. Jesus' ministry, replete with scenes of healing, exorcising, feeding, forgiving, and preaching the reign of God, made the love of God experientially available to all, the marginalized most of all (Johnson, *Quest for the Living God*).

The reign preached and witnessed to by Jesus “involves justice and peace among everyone, healing and wholeness everywhere, fullness of life enjoyed by all. It is what the scriptures call the situation of *shalom*, peace experienced not only as the absence of war but peace as the fullness of life” (Elizabeth Johnson, *Consider Jesus: Waves of Renewal in Christology*, 1990). This reign “is not established by dominating relationships but by a new kind of community where the last shall be first and where those who are first are called to conversion to the “least of these, my brothers and sisters” (Matt 25:40)” (Elizabeth Johnson, *Female Symbols for God: The Apophatic Tradition and Social Justice*, 2010).

This God of love is not the all-powerful idol that legitimates human coercive power. God’s very nature is kenotic, “it is in God’s nature to be self-emptying” (Denise Ackermann drawing on Julian of Norwich, *After the Locusts: Letters from a Landscape of Faith*, 2003). We forget that when we read Philippians 2:5-11 that the incarnation “in its profound simplicity, means “God with us,” God with the world and the world within God” (Sallie McFague, *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril*, 2001). The kenosis of the Word of God (Jesus) “embodies the self-emptying of the God of love” (Johnson, *Consider Jesus*). This is witnessed to by a Russian Orthodox theologian who believes that “self-emptying [is] a feature of the inner life of the Trinity,” because “self-giving kenotic love ... express[es] the relationship between the persons of the Trinity” (Paul Gavrilyuk, *The kenotic theology of Sergius Bulgakov*, 2005).

Self-emptying is risk, self-emptying creates vulnerability. The mission and ministry of Jesus led to the cross. “His death results from a very active ministry in which love and compassion for the dispossessed led him into conflict with the powerful. ... On the cross Jesus symbolizes the exact opposite of male dominating power. Rather, on the cross power is poured out in self-sacrificing love” (Johnson, *Consider Jesus*).

There is much debate about whether God suffers with Jesus on the cross. To name God’s very nature as kenotic and vulnerable is to open the theologian imagination to a God who suffers. Jurgen Moltmann quotes from a passage from Holocaust survivor Eli Wiesel’s novel *Night* based on the author’s firsthand experience: “The SS hanged two Jewish men and a youth in front of the whole camp. The men died quickly, but the death throes of the youth lasted for half an hour. “Where is God? Where is he?” someone asked behind me. As the youth still hung in torment in the noose after a long time, I heard the man call again, “Where is God now?” And I heard a voice within myself answer “Where is he? He is here, he is hanging

there on the gallows ...” For Moltmann, God “is there on the cross, there on the gallows, there where anyone suffers.” (in Johnson, *Consider Jesus*).

Remember that God-imaging is our ultimate point of reference, it expresses and forms the bedrock convictions and actions of our communities and is never neutral. To no longer image God as all powerful father, king and lord and to be open to God as vulnerable, self-emptying, suffering and crucified is a risk at a number of levels. Four I will name.

Firstly, we need to realise that the dominant traditional God-imaging is what it is ... dominant and dominating. Rosemary Radford Ruether names the dominant God-imaging as “sacred canopy theology” (quoted in Ackermann, *After the Locusts*) that relies on the fact that the traditional metaphors of God are not radically questioned so that the dominant social order of imperial/patriarchal power remains intact. To question this will elicit conflict.

Secondly, traditional God-imaging relies on a disconnection between the personal and the political; it depends on an “excessive preoccupation with personal morality at the expense of a social conscience” (Ackermann, *After the Locusts*). Embracing kenotic vulnerability requires the development of a social conscience through deliberate movements out of our comfort zones to begin to see “Where is God” amidst the personal and institutional abuses of power.

Thirdly, the traditional God-imaging “evolved as an effort to escape from mortality, finitude and vulnerability” (Rosemary Radford Ruether drawing on Ivone Gebara, *Women and Redemption: A Theological History*, 2011). While dominant men constructed this God-imaging, we have all been shaped by it. To risk re-imaging God as kenotic and vulnerable requires that we face our own limited vulnerable human existence and have the courage to risk the gift of life to be like God – kenotic and vulnerable – for the sake of the “least of these, my brothers and sisters.”

And finally, traditional God-imaging judges failure harshly. Living kenotic vulnerability requires accepting failure and loss as blessed opportunities to learn to let go dominating relationships and seek “a new kind of community where the last shall be first.”

Much more needs to be said. To seek to incarnate a vulnerable God requires a deliberate journey of conversion. Our God-imaging is decisive.