

**Sermon Notes of
Nan Kuhlman's Sermon on May 8, 2022:**

"Liberating Language: Expanding How We See God"

[In today's sermon, Nan Kuhlman, at church in the Y, shows us that our language in how we describe God matters because it affects our perception of God and how we treat others.]

Introduction:

- Happy Mother's Day and a happy other than a Mother's Day, because if you're not a mother, we celebrate you, anyway.
- Happy Everyone Day!

- Today's sermon title is, "Liberating Language: Expanding How We See God"
- Craig and his wife, Nan, have been watching a documentary On HBO MAX by the social scientist and researcher Brene Brown.
- She's best known for her TED talk about vulnerability and shame which aired in 2010 and now has over 57 million views.
- Dr. Brown has a new book out called, "Atlas of the Heart" and the documentary on HBO Max is based on this new book.
- In the new book, she says that language has the power to define our experiences.

- To illustrate that, she uses the example of anxiety and excitement.
- If you think about doing something and you're a little nervous, when you say, "I feel anxious about doing this," how does this affect your nervousness? It inflates it.
- On the other hand, if you frame the event by saying "I feel excited about doing this," it changes your view about those butterflies in your stomach.
- Dr. Brown is saying that the language we use shapes how we experience events as well as our communication.

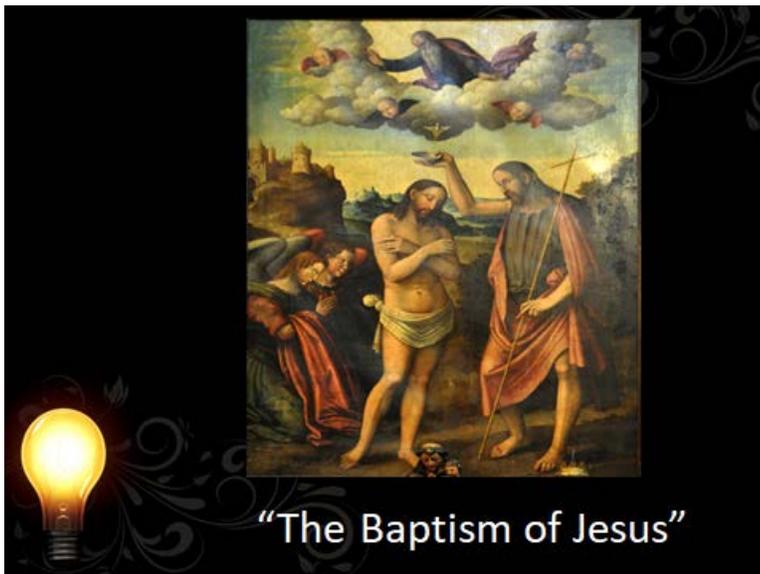
- If we think about the word "home," for some of us that might mean Southern California, the San Gabriel Valley.
- But some of you grew up in other areas, like Missouri or Chicago or Ohio.
- Craig and Nan grew up in Ohio, moved to Pasadena, moved back to Ohio, and now back to the San Gabriel Valley.
- When people think about the word "home," they sometimes frame moving or changing homes or hometowns as a type of loss, but did we really lose the homes we left?

- Nan has a high school classmate who has always lived in rural northwestern Ohio.
- She married her high school sweetheart, and they live in the country in the same school district we graduated from.
- She refuses to drive to Columbus, Ohio, because that would mean bigger city traffic with four or more lanes.
- And when Nan thinks about what she's missing because she's afraid to do something outside her comfort zone that makes Nan sad.

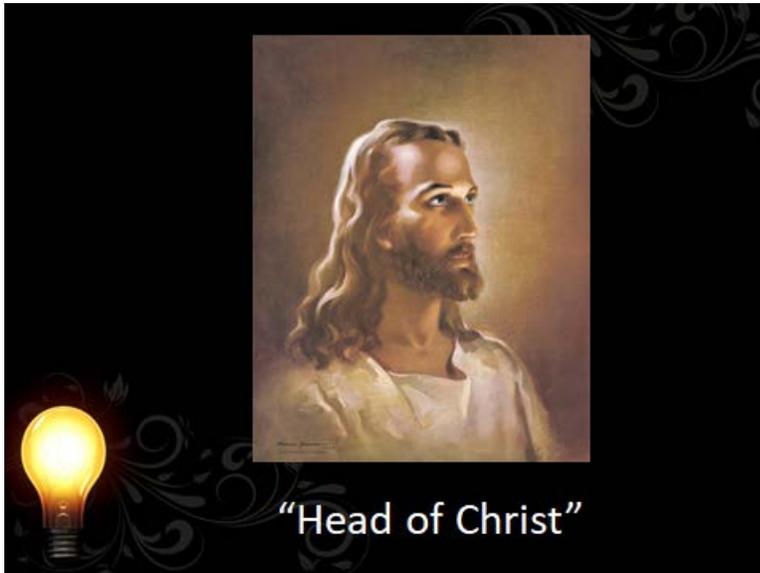
- If Nan would have felt like she had an equally good choice each time she moved, she would have chosen to stay where she was.
 - Nan's not a risk-taker. But in hindsight, when she considers all the homes and places she lived, she doesn't feel like she's lost.
 - If anything, her world and her heart have grown bigger.
 - Because she and her husband made homes in a number of places in both Ohio and California, she's discovered new places and people to love, places and people she never would have known if she had stayed put in rural northwestern Ohio in the same school district she graduated from.
 - Nan's heart and her perception of the world has expanded because the word home has been made bigger to her by moving outside of her comfort zone.
-
- Today we're going to talk about how language affects our perception of God and our perception of each other.
 - If we are stuck in a language rut when we talk about God in a way that keeps us comfortable but limited.
 - Since we're creatures of habit and we tend to remain in our comfort zone, we probably have certain words that we default to when we're talking about God.
 - What are some nouns or adjectives that we commonly use in reference to God?
 - Answers from the audience:
 - Almighty
 - Lord
 - Good
-
- We have preconceived ideas about words that we apply to God as well as other things, and sometimes those ideas cloud our understanding of God.
 - Human beings can only speak about God through symbols and images that show what God is like, not what God's essence is.
 - But these symbols help us understand by taking the invisible and giving us something visible to compare it to.
-
- But there are problems with language.
 - Language is subject to cultural influence, and if you've ever studied the origins of words (called etymology), you know how culture and the development of technology has changed our language.
 - If we would have told our grandparents thirty or more years ago that we would "google" the weather forecast, they wouldn't have known what we were talking about.
-
- Culture also affects the language and symbols we use in Christianity.
 - Its influence on language is a little hard to see, so we need to start thinking about cultural influence on Christian imagery first by using artwork first, and then we'll think about culture's influence on language.
-
- In the first picture, the artwork is above an altar in the Cathedral of St. Savior in Spain. It's called "God the Father."
 - We can notice God holding the world in his left hand and angels around the periphery.



- The second picture, called “The Baptism of Christ,” is located at the Cathedral of St. Lawrence in Croatia.
- God is in the clouds.
- What do we notice about the depiction of God in these two examples?



- God is pictured as an older white man in both of these pictures.
- Here’s another well-known picture of Jesus painted by Warner Sallman that has been reproduced a billion times.
- What do we notice about this picture?



- Again, the cultural influence is obvious.
- He looks European with blue eyes.
- But, Jesus was a Middle Eastern Jewish man, so he would not have blue eyes, light skin, and light hair.
- He most likely would look like someone that TSA would pull out of the security line at an airport for a pat-down.
- The influence of culture on religious art is easy to see, but the influence of culture on the language used to talk about God is not always noticeable.
- Sometimes we’ve used familiar phrases and imagery for so long that we don’t even stop to think about what they mean.

Language Matters:

- We might dismiss the issue as unimportant, but we’re here today to discuss that the language we use to address and think about God is important because it shapes our experience and perception of God.
- While the language we use to describe God doesn’t change God, it does affect how we interact with God and each other.
- So, in the example about the word “home,” Nan’s high school friend had a very narrow view of home, and that shaped her experience of the world.
- Because “home” for her was very limited, she only felt comfortable in a very restricted area.
- For those of us who have had a number of homes, we understand that we don’t lose anything when we move.
- We gain – our hearts expand, and we find more people and places to love.
- Consider this in the context of the language we use for God.
- Now, when we limit ourselves to a very narrow view of God, such as a white male God, we limit our ability to see God in other contexts.
- We box God in, our ability to perceive the fullness of God shrinks, and that shapes our worldview.

- Many Christians only talk about God using masculine terms or father metaphors as if this is the only acceptable symbol or picture of God.
- But Scripture actually provides us with a diversity of images: masculine images, feminine images, and non-gendered images.

Deuteronomy 32:18: “You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you; you forgot the God who gave you birth.” [We have a Rock and Laboring Mother image of God.]

Psalm 27:1: “The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?” [So, God is our Light, a non-gendered image.]

Isaiah 66:13: “As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.” [So, here’s an image of God as our Mother.]

- When we reduce God to a single image, we only have a partial picture.
- And when that partial picture is a father, often people assign cultural assumptions about human fathers to God.
- A 2020 Stanford study found out that how people visualize God can impact their decisions about people in leadership roles.
- The study participants were US Christians, and researchers were surprised at the number of participants who assigned a gender and race to God.
- The study results revealed that when people think of God as a white man, they view white males as better leaders than blacks and females.
- But Scripture tells us in **John 4:24** that **“God is Spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”**
- God does not have a gender; God does not have a race; God transcends.
- Research study results like these should make us stop and think about why people think God has a gender.
- This brings us back to our use of language. For example, in some churches, only masculine names may be used for God, and any feminine imagery has to be used in its biblical context.
- This mindset assumes that God exists as a gendered being, like us.
- Using only male language for God is an androcentric approach (male approach) that can be a problem both theologically and pastorally.
- Theologian Elizabeth Johnson suggests three ways that using predominantly male language for God can be harmful:
 - 1) Exclusively male language for God is often understood literally: Because exclusively male images offer no alternatives, they often are taken literally.
 - This reduces people’s understanding of God to an infinitely powerful man.
 - If you’ve had a good relationship with your human father, then it might not seem like a problem.
 - But even your very good human father was flawed and limited.
 - For some people who may have suffered trauma at the hands of their fathers, calling God “Father” could create a stumbling block.
 - In addition, exclusively male images of God also imply that women are less like God, even though **Genesis 1:27** says, **“So God created humankind in**

his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”

- So, both men and women are created in God’s image.
- 2) Exclusively male language for God promotes idolatry. Idolatry means “the worship of a physical object as a god.”
- Once male images are taken literally, they can lead to idolatry because they box God in by using language.
 - It leads us to think of God as male and as having dominant masculine characteristics which isn’t accurate.
 - When God is associated with male images, like king, warrior, landowner, and prince, we can forget God is also nurturing, compassionate, and merciful.
 - God is not literally a king or a father, even as God is not literally a rock, a hen, or a woman in labor or other symbols and imagery found in Scripture.
 - God is Spirit, and the language and imagery we use needs to reflect the multifaceted character of God.
- 3) Exclusively male language for God justifies patriarchy: Language can have powerful social effects, justifying attitudes and practices that discriminate against women and girls.
- Properly understanding that God transcends gender helps ensure that the church does not participate in practices that devalue women and girls.
 - When we aren’t sensitive to the symbolism and imagery of the language used to refer to God, we tend to default to our culture, and our culture says God is a white male.
 - There’s a saying that goes, “If God is male, then the male is God.”
 - But when we understand that language about God in Scripture is full of metaphors and analogies, we open ourselves to a more expansive view of God and each other.

How did we get here?

- Culture has shaped the language used for God, starting with the culture of the ancient Hebrews as well as the culture of the translators, some early church fathers, and even some modern theologians.
- 1) Culture of the ancient Hebrews:
- Hebrew scholar Samuel Terrien writes in his book, “Till the Heart Sings: A Biblical Theology of Manhood and Womanhood”, that the ancient Hebrews did not call God “Mother” because of the prevalence of mother goddess worship during that time period.
 - This mother goddess worship did not empower women; instead, it confused the worship of the Divine with nature.
 - Mother Earth was worshiped as Mother Goddess, and these religions merged sex and fertility with economic security all together.
 - Many of their rituals involved temple prostitutes, which clearly did not empower women but enslaved them.
 - The Old Testament attempted to focus on God’s transcendence over nature, not to show contempt or disrespect for women or mothers but to minimize culture’s influence on the ancient Hebrews.

- At the same time, calling God “father” also was not intended to glorify men or fathers.
- If we look at the imagery and symbolism of the Old Testament as it applies to God, we see a consistent merging of both father and mother metaphors.
- Interestingly, the name God provided when Moses asked in Exodus 3, Yahweh, combines both female and male grammatical endings. “Yah” is feminine and “weh” is masculine in Hebrew.

2) Culture of the translators:

- One example showing how Biblical translators were affected by culture is the way Romans 16:7 was translated.
- In the NRSV, Paul writes in **Romans 16:7**, “**Greet Andronicus and Junia, my countrymen and my fellow prisoners, who are of note among the apostles, who also were in Christ before me.**”
- The Greek name Junia was translated in its female form in earlier translations until the twentieth century when the name began to be translated in its masculine form, Junias.
- Research shows that the reason the translators changed the form from female to male was the “assumption that a woman could not have been an apostle.”
- But that is not what Paul wrote.

3) Culture of some early church fathers:

- According to author and theologian Elizabeth A. Johnson in her book, “She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse”, the early church fathers were influenced by culture.
- For example, Thomas Aquinas, a philosopher and theologian living in the 1200s, viewed males as the “pinnacle of creation” and saw females as “defective” and only created by God for reproduction.
- Aquinas thought that a woman’s “defective” physical state meant that her mind was also “defective”, and he based these ideas on the Greek philosopher Aristotle.
- To be fair, there were a number of other well-known church fathers who wrote about both the masculine and feminine qualities of God.
- For example, Clement, the bishop of Alexandria who lived around 150-215 AD writes in his book, “Salvation to the Rich Man,” “In his ineffable essence he is father; in his compassion to us he became mother. The father by loving becomes feminine.”
- In another book called Christ the Educator, Clement writes, “The Word [Christ] is everything to his little ones, both father and mother.”
- Augustine, the fourth-century bishop of Hippo in North Africa, uses the image of God as a mother to show that God nurses and cares for the faithful: “He who has promised us heavenly food has nourished us on milk, having recourse to a mother’s tenderness.”
- The bishop of Nyssa, Gregory, who was one of the early Greek church fathers living from 335-395 AD, talks about God’s “unknowable essence” or transcendence with feminine terms: “The divine power, though exalted far above our nature and inaccessible to all approach, like a tender mother who

joins in the inarticulate utterances of her babe, gives to our human nature what it is capable of receiving.”

4) Culture of modern-day theologians:

- Though there isn't time today to address at length how a gender hierarchy where women ranked under men came to be a commonly accepted church practice, Nan would highly recommend reading the book by Beth Allison Barr called, “The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth.”
- Dr. Barr is a professor of medieval and church history at Baylor University, and in her book, she uses her personal story at the Southern Baptist Church where her husband was a youth pastor, along with her in-depth knowledge of church history, to illustrate how nonsensical and unfair such practices are.
- In her story, Dr. Barr was forbidden in her church to teach a teen Sunday School class because she, a woman, would be teaching young men, even though she had a PhD in church history.
- In a nutshell, Dr. Barr points out that, “patriarchy was not what God wanted; patriarchy was a result of human sin,” and it is deeply connected with “structural racism and system oppression.”
- One way some modern-day theologians continue to promote oppression of women is their insistence on the validity of the doctrine of complementarianism, which says that men and women have different but complementary roles and responsibilities.
- Under complementarianism, men have leadership responsibilities and women support them.
- There's no discussion about whether those men actually have leadership skills, gifting or training, and there's no discussion about women's leadership talents or desires for ministry.
- Dr. Barr says that “complementarianism is patriarchy, and patriarchy is about power. Neither have ever been about Jesus.”

How can we move toward a bigger, more inclusive understanding of God?

1) Pay attention to biblical examples where gender is subverted.

- This means noticing examples where men and women do not follow typical gender roles and then thinking about how this expands or changes our view of God or each other. Here are some examples:
- Deborah was a prophet and judge who led the Israelites to victory over the Canaanites in battle (Judges 4).
- What does this example say about women in leadership?
- She was obviously called by God to do this.
- What does this say about men who follow or support women in leadership?
- It requires humility and an understanding about individual gifting.
- Paul compares himself to a mother giving birth in **Galatians 4:19: “My little children, for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you.”**
- Now, all of you men have never experienced the pain of labor.
- But it requires commitment because a woman is giving every ounce of her strength to endure it.

- What does this image of Paul as a laboring mother tell us about his commitment to the Galatian church?
 - Paul wouldn't give up, but only move forward.
 - Can we think of examples where we have been committed to a cause or another person with this level of commitment?
 - Now, what does Paul's example say about God's commitment to us?
 - In labor, you are committed. God is committed to us, forever.
- 2) Notice how Jesus participates in disrupting gender norms and consider what this tells us about God's heart toward women and girls.
- Jesus says in **Matthew 23:37**, "**Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing.**"
 - What adjectives or descriptive words does this image of Jesus as a hen hovering over Jerusalem or over us bring to mind? (Safety, comfort)
 - Jesus encounters the Syro-Phoenician woman whose daughter was possessed (Mark 7:24-30).
 - If you remember the story, the woman begs Jesus to help her daughter, and he responds to her by calling her a "dog," telling her what the world of that time period would say to woman like her: you're not worthy.
 - But the woman tells him in so many words, "I am worthy," and then Jesus confirms that worth by meeting her request and healing her daughter.
 - Have you considered that Jesus's first response to the woman was typical of what the disciples would expect him to say?
 - Could Jesus have been using this mother's commitment to her child, knowing that she would press him despite the insult, as a way to show the disciples that this Gentile woman was valuable and her daughter worthy of healing?
 - If you were a disciple, observing Jesus in this situation, and you saw Jesus go against cultural norms to heal a Gentile, what would you think?
 - How would that change your world view?
 - It's interesting to notice how many times in scripture Jesus commends people for having great faith – and most of those times, those people are women.
 - Jesus saw women as people of value in a culture that did not value them.
 - Jesus washes his followers' feet (John 13:1-20).
 - Bible commentators note that the towel Jesus put on his waist was the symbol of those who washed other people's feet, usually wives and slave girls.
 - While foot washing was a part of hospitality and sometimes a demonstration of honor and love, it also was an indication of power relationships.
 - The husband did not wash the wife's feet.
 - A free man would not wash another's feet, and even a male Jewish slave would not wash another man's feet.
 - Put yourself at that Last Supper.
 - You're watching a man who has fed more than 5000 people with five loaves and two fishes.
 - This guy has healed people and even raised a couple of people from the dead.
 - And now he is humiliating himself right in front of you.

- What does this image of Jesus taking on the role of a lowly female servant say about love and leadership? How does it instruct us?
- Jesus subverts a typically female role, and this upsets the disciples.
- Jesus goes even further to disrupt the gender norms of the culture by telling the disciples that they should wash each other's feet.

Concluding comments:

- So, language matters.
- As Dr. Brene Brown has expressed, it shapes our experiences.
- And in the example of the word "home," we learned that sticking with our comfort zone deprives us of new experiences and opportunities to love new places and people.
- As we've seen, Christian artwork and language are shaped by culture.
- When the language used to refer to God or to describe God is too narrow, we limit our understanding of God and God's love for all humanity.
- At its worst, narrow, androcentric language about God alienates people and sets the stage for toxic theology and a patriarchal church culture.
- On this Mother's Day, hopefully we understand the language we use to talk about God does not change God's essence, but it opens the door to new, expansive connections for us.
- It gives us fresh eyes to look at one another and a new way of seeing that not only is God our Father, but also our Mother, our Rock, and the Light of our Salvation.

Closing prayer:

Our Beloved, who rejoices over us with gladness, who renews us with love and loudly sings over us. We are grateful for the gift of language and symbolism as you've given us the ability to catch a glimpse of your backside much like Moses did when you covered him with the palm of your hand, as you passed by.

Sometimes, our dear One, our language becomes a trap and a snare. We're caught in mind sets that restrict and limit our freedom of joy you intended us to have. We participate knowingly or unknowingly in systems of oppression that make life harder for others. And, we repent of that.

O Fountain of Living Water, wash our hearts and our minds so that we might see the ways that have boxed you in and kept our eyes from seeing your loving kindness and then made those excuses for not showing your loving kindness to others.

May our words, our language be loving and kind and just. May women and girls know their value in your sight, affirmed by your church. O Mother God, who continues to labor over us, enduring the pain of our transformation, we give you thanks.

In the name of the living Christ, we pray. Amen.