

## ***Toxic Masculinity***

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A little over a week ago, I read in the news that the Pullman Police Department put out a warning. They got word that on multiple social media posts in Pullman, individuals had declared April 24 to be “rape day.”

I could barely believe what I was reading. The warning went on to advise women to take several precautions that it listed. While “rape day” might have been someone’s idea of a joke, it reveals a deadly serious problem on college campuses across the country. Sexual assault is an epidemic among college students. And it is estimated that the vast majority of the attacks go unreported because women think that they will not be believed. And the few perpetrators who might be convicted often receive little more than a slap on the wrist. College administrators, police officers and prosecutors discourage women from pressing charges to avoid “ruining the life” of their attacker. He’s a good boy who just made a mistake, they say.

This problem involves more than frat boys and college athletes. We see it with television personalities, with ministers and priests, with Supreme Court nominees. It runs through every level the entire breadth of our society.

Let’s be absolutely clear: this is completely and totally a *male problem* and is the result of a *toxic masculinity*. Toxic Masculinity is violent, aggressive and abusive; it exercises power over others; it is entitled and takes what it wants; it assumes that women are inferior and treats them as objects; it lacks empathy and is predatory. It has an obsession with guns and war.

There has been some progress against toxic masculinity, such as the recent “me too” movement where victims have bravely come forward to share their pain and demand accountability. But it remains an indelible part of our society.

In this morning’s ancient witness from the book of Genesis, we have the familiar story of Sodom. Two traveling strangers were in Sodom and Lot takes them in to give them shelter and protection. A mob of men had surrounded Lot’s house and demanded that Lot send them out so they could rape them. Now this story has often been interpreted as a judgement against homosexuality, as we have men threatening rape of other men. But it actually is a judgement against this violent, predatory, toxic masculinity that seeks to humiliate and dominate others. Lot recognizes this as a “wicked thing” and begs the mob not to do this. But Lot himself is a product and prisoner of patriarchy, and he says, “Look, I have two daughters who have never slept with a man. Let me bring them out to you, and you can do what you like with them.”

Toxic masculinity permeates even our sacred, ancient texts.

For generations God has been exclusively male, and this has been a problem! Male language for God has been used to justify male dominance and patriarchy. As the feminist theologian, Mary Daly, said, “If God is male, male is God.” (*Beyond God the Father*) And so in the past 40-50 years,

we've done our best to be gender-neutral. Stopped using male personal pronoun, "he," and other male language such as "lord" and "king."

But is it ever OK to talk about God as male or as king? Yes, referring to God as male, as father, as king should not project traditional characteristics upon God, but *challenge* those traditional characteristics.

If God is male, this redefines what male is.

If God is king, this redefines what a king is.

If God is a man, a father a king, it changes what these mean: non-violent, gentle, loving, not punishing, detached, remote and war-like.

In fact, Jesus used the images of the king for God and kingdom for the reality of the Sacred. Only here's the thing: Jesus being ironic. New Testament scholar, Robert Funk wrote,

*The kingdom of the parables is not the Kingdom of David and Solomon. On the contrary, the sayings of Jesus demote the royal line, assign the powerful and wealthy to an inferior position, and promote the poor, the tearful, and the dispossessed to the status of the privileged class. It is a Kingdom of nobodies.*

For Jesus, the realm of God was an anti-kingdom. But his disciples didn't "get" it. And most of his followers still don't. Again, Funk wrote,

*Jesus advocates complete trust in God the Father. Yet the God of Jesus does not behave like an oriental monarch. God is not a cosmic bully; God does not force humans to act as they are instructed... Jesus elects the underside of the social world as heroic.*

Through his parables and his actions, Jesus uses the image of the kingdom, but he *turns it upside down*. Even the best kings of the ancient world were contrary to the ways of God.

In the story of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the city of King David, Jesus mocks the image of the mighty king. Instead of the royal military parade with mighty chariots and horses, Jesus rides into town on a donkey. He subverted the image of the kingdom. As a piece of street theater it was brilliant and comic. But the crowd doesn't "get" it. And most of Jesus' followers through the centuries don't get it, either.

And so instead they write all these hymns about God as a great king, and they talk about God as a ruler who wages war, violently destroys enemies, and punishes his disobedient subjects.

Richard Rohr has this great line: "Your image of God creates you." And so if we are working with an image of God as this violent, punishing, fear inducing king, what kind of people does this create?

But Jesus spoke against the dominant tradition, even though this tradition has hijacked Jesus, himself, and uses his name to dominate and exclude other people and religions.

The Greek word for kingdom is *basileia*. And when it was used, this word is most often translated as "empire." Now, many modern folks, when they hear "kingdom of God" think that it sounds too

harsh, too male, too domineering—and they are right, of course. So they translated *basileia* as “reign” or “realm” of God to make it more consistent with the loving nature of God that we see in Jesus. But here is what I say: They have the right diagnosis but the wrong cure. Instead of softening the term, I would make it harder, in some cases. I’d use “empire.” Why? Well, first, because empire was a political term. When Jesus used the term empire everyone immediately thought of *the* empire, the empire of Rome. To speak of the empire of God would have been considered subversive and very risky.

I believe that Jesus was challenging the unjust empire of Rome with its severe disparity and inequality. It was a system where most of the people lived on the edge and the powerful exploited and oppressed the average person.

To say that God is king does not so much define God as it re-defines how rulers, leaders and governments would act when God is in charge.

The system was rigged. A very small number of wealthy people called the shots, using people as a means to an end in the production of their wealth. And so when Jesus used that word, he was challenging the unfairness and injustice of the system. He was siding with the little people, not the powerful ones. *He was challenging the very idea of empire itself.* Jesus was being very pointed and ironic and political. It would be like using “the regime of God.”

One person who understood this was Martin Niemoller, a Lutheran pastor who died after eight years in the Dachau concentration camp for resisting the Nazi regime in World War II. He wrote a book of sermons titled, *Christ is My Fuhrer.* (laughter) Now you laugh—the same way those laughed at Jesus’ phrase, “kingdom of God.” And my point is that we’ve lost that laugh of recognition.

So the words of Jesus stayed the same, but we have almost completely lost that sense of irony. The word just rolls off our 21<sup>st</sup> century lips with little awareness: “thy kingdom come...” And then we think of God’s kingdom or empire as—well—an *empire*, one that will also destroy and dominate all other empires. For that is what empires do.

Look, I can understand other progressives who avoid the image of God as king altogether. Probably better not to use it at all than to use it uncritically. But when we change the words and use, for example, “kin-dom” for the word, “kingdom”—as understandable as that change might be—we lose the tension that Jesus created when he used *basileia* or its Arabic equivalent. We lose the irony and the politically subversive quality of the term.

And so a progressive view, it seems to me, understands the limitations of language and the impossibility of finding the perfect translation sometimes as we attempt to span millennia and cultures. Perhaps we should use “king” or “emperor” to describe God and terms “kingdom” or “empire” of God. But we should use them sparingly and carefully, treating them like nitroglycerin.

I like how Robert Funk addressed this dilemma. He refers to it as “the un-kingdom of God.” The un-kingdom of God is about God’s justice in contrast to the systemic injustice of all kingdoms and empires of this world.

For Jesus, of course, God is great and majestic, but not the kind of greatness and majesty we see in the empire:

not in military power,  
not in the mansions and castles of the rich,  
not in the impressive technologies,  
not in tall steeples,  
not in popularity,  
not in political power.

But rather, the un-kingdom, the un-empire of God is not we expect it to be. It is where  
the last are the first,  
the least are the greatest,  
the weak are the strong.

Who is in it? The homeless, the sick, the forgotten, the losers, the unsuccessful, the uneducated, the unrighteous sinners, the poor, the discarded. It is a kingdom where the dignity and value of every person is upheld, and its greatness and majesty is in the justice and compassion exhibited for all. One must become like a lowly, insignificant child to enter it.

There has always been a problem of domesticating Jesus and de-radicalizing his message about the kingdom of God. Traditional theology quickly forgets that Jesus turned the images of God as male, father, and king upside down.

And Jesus spoke of the un-kingdom by using parables, comparing it to many unlikely and surprising things. One of my favorites is the parable of the mustard seed.

*The disciples said to Jesus, "Tell us what the kingdom of heaven is like." He said, "It's like a mustard seed, the smallest of all seeds, but when it falls on prepared soil, it produces a large plant and becomes a shelter for birds of the sky."*

The gospel writers and Jesus' contemporaries did not appreciate Jesus' humor and saw the tiny mustard seed as an inadequate metaphor for God's great kingdom. Jesus Seminar scholars point out:

*The mustard seed is proverbial for its smallness. The mustard plant is actually an annual shrub or weed, yet in Matthew and Luke it becomes a "tree," while in Mark it becomes the "biggest tree" of all garden plants. Only in Thomas does it remain simply "a large plant."*

*...In his use of this metaphor, Jesus is understating the image for comic effect: the mighty cedar (the Hebrew symbol for a towering empire) is now an ordinary weed. This is a parody. For Jesus, God's domain was a modest affair, not a new world empire. It was pervasive but unrecognized, rather than noisy or arresting. (The Five Gospels, p. 484)*

But the un-kingdom of God, according to Jesus, is here but hidden, like a tiny seed planted at the heart of each moment. It's not somewhere in the future, about to come with majesty, force and violence. It is already here, growing, blossoming. It's like a weed, persistent, spreading, impossible to kill.

As Alfred North Whitehead wrote:

*The life of Christ is not an exhibition of overruling power. Its glory is for those who can discern it, and not for the world. Its power lies in its absence of force...*

*If the modern world is to find God, it must do so through love and not through fear.*

And so the images of the Divine as male, as father as king are subversive images. They don't bless the status quo; they challenge it. They don't define God; they redefine the world. They dethrone patriarchy. They detoxify masculinity. They defuse dominance and oppression. They call us to change the way we think about how to be male, to be a father and to govern a nation.

Thanks be to God. Amen.