

Happy Mother's Day – I am so glad that you are here today. We want you to know that if you are a mother we honor you. Mother's day brings up many feelings for me as I am sure that it does for many of you. I struggled with my relationship with my mother, I strived through medicine to become a mother, and I was surprised to now be a grandmother.

Of course, not everyone here is a mother. Many women are not mothers, either by choice or circumstance. And the men are obviously not mothers.

But one thing we have in common is that we all have mothers. For good and for ill, we all have someone we call Mom. Where ever you are in this day of honoring mothers we are glad that you came to be here with us as we continue our series on the names of God.

To think about mothers is to think more broadly about women. And women and religion have had a rocky history, to put it nicely. We all know that throughout history women have taken a lesser role in society. Women of the past did not have a voice in government; in the workplace; in homes or even in churches. Women were not allowed to vote until 1920 that was less than 100 years ago. In the last few decades, our society has made great strides toward equality for everyone, but there is still an obvious disparity between the opportunities available women as compared to their male counterparts.

According to *The Atlantic* magazine's May, 2014 cover story, something is still holding women back. The article, titled THE CONFIDENCE GAP, was written by Katty Kay - the lead anchor for BBC World News America - and Claire Shipman - the senior national correspondent for Good Morning America. They observe that women now earn more college and graduate degrees than men do. Women make up half the workforce yet men continue to get promoted faster and be paid more. The difference they observe is not that women still have fewer opportunities or that corporations are sexist - that's mostly not true anymore, at least not to the degree it once was.

According to Kay and Shipman, the biggest barrier to women succeeding at the highest levels is that women are plagued with self-doubt. Women have the education, the intelligence, the strength yet lack the confidence to stand tall. We tend to downplay what we can do when we speak about ourselves or our accomplishments. Men don't have the same problem. In general, men tend to overestimate their abilities and performance and women underestimate both.

Unfortunately, the Church is no different. We see far fewer women than men in leadership roles. There are by far more male senior pastors than there are female ones. When a church is approached to hire a new pastor, the board is given an opportunity to interview women for the role of senior pastor and most will not even allow women the chance to interview.

This is a spiritual problem. We as the church should be leading society in the promoting of strong female leaders. We believe that women are created in the image of God. That God gifts and calls women exactly like God gifts and calls men. The Church ought to be the solution to our culture's confidence gap. Yet we are not – the debate is even stronger in the church.

God created women. We are half of God's plan for humankind. We were made in the image of God, and God should be our source of confidence to be who God created us to be. [GodAsBoth]

Sheila, what do you mean when you say that women are made in the image of God? Most people think of God as a man. We call God Father and Jesus was a man... so isn't the image of God male?

Well let's look in the Bible for our answers. Turn in your bibles to Genesis 1:27, if you picked up a bible on the way in it is on page XX. If you don't have a bible please take this one as out gift.

So God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. -- Genesis 1:27

We were both created in the image of God. Male was created and female was created. The image of God is both male and female. So men do bear the image of God, but so do women. We are *all* created in the image of God.

Some of our confusion is over the difference between sex and gender. Think of it as "man and woman" vs. "male and female". [SexVGender] Sex is about biology. If you have one set of organs, you're a woman. And if you have the other set, you're a man. It's pretty cut-and-dry, across all cultures, around the world.

Gender, on the other hand, is socially constructed. It's about males and females - male traits are what men tend to do and female traits are what women tend to do. And the thing about gender is that it's relative.

For instance, if you walked up to a couple with a baby, and said baby is dressed in all pink, you would know it's a baby girl. Blue? A baby boy. It's a nearly-unspoken rule in our culture that pink is for girls and blue is for boys. That pink is a girly color and blue is a masculine color.

But let's read a quote together from the *Ladies Home Journal*, from not quite 100 years ago. In 1918, an article entitled "Gender Specific Colors" advised:

"There has been a great diversity of opinion on the subject, but the generally accepted rule is pink for the boy and blue for the girl. The reason is that pink being a more decided and stronger color is more suitable for the boy, while blue, which is more delicate and dainty, is prettier for the girl." [Let's decorate the slide too. Maybe with baby clothes or something.]

Pink for boys because it's obviously more masculine. Blue for the girls because it's so dainty. And this less than 100 years ago. This is what we mean by gender being culturally relative: what traits do we associate with those who are biologically male? Maybe it's confidence. Liking sports. Being competitive or stubborn. Having mostly shallow friendships. And what about those who are biologically female? Maybe it's nurturing. Enjoying long conversations and reading. Having deeper relationships.

Even in our own culture, those aren't 100% true all the time. We all know couples where the man is more nurturing or the woman is more competitive. And when you look at other cultures, in other countries, around the world and throughout time, what counts as masculine or feminine changes.

Biology is consistent. Gender is relative.

[GodAsMale] So when we talk about God: obviously God doesn't have a sex. But does God have a gender? It's tempting to think so... after all, the Bible does talk about God as Father, and uses male pronouns (like he and him) to refer to God.

That God is referred to as a male in the Bible shouldn't surprise us. The Bible was written in a patriarchal

culture. Women, what *should* surprise us about the Bible is where it diverges sharply from the cultures around it. And particularly with regards to God's gender, there're two major differences.

First is how Yahweh differs from the pagan gods of Canaan and Egypt - the gods the other nations worship have sex. [PaganGods] They have bodies and they have sex organs. They're man or woman. And these gods get married. Zeus is married to Hera in Greek mythology. In Egypt, Osiris was married to Isis. And in Canaan - the lands that surrounded Israel, Ba'al was married to Asherah.

The pagan cultures considered their two chief deities to be the king and queen of Heaven. And their worship included a bunch of fertility rituals - the most common shrine to Asherah mentioned in the Bible is a big pole (I'll let you figure out what it symbolized).

That wasn't because the Canaanites were sexual perverts. Infant mortality rate in those days was upwards of 50%. Few children lived to adulthood. Fertility was necessary for the survival of your family, your village. So the cultures around Israel worshiped a Mother and a Father. A male and a female. A king and a queen.

But not Israel. Yahweh has no spouse. Yahweh has no divine partner, no queen to his king. No mother to his father.

That's really strange. Unique out of all the religions in its day. That should make us sit up and ask, Why?!

But that's not the only strange thing.

The other important difference between the Bible and the cultures around Israel is that Bible presents God as both male and female. While most of the metaphors about God are male - Father, warrior, etc., we find a surprising number of places where God refers to himself as a mother, as a woman.

The book of Hosea is a picture of God calling Israel back to him.

I myself taught Israel how to walk, leading him along by the hand but he doesn't know or even care that it was I who took care of him. I led Israel along with my ropes of kindness and love. I lifted the yoke from his neck and I myself stopped to feed him. -- Hosea 11:3-4 God is nurturing. In the ancient world, raising and nurturing a child was exclusive to women. He uses this example to show how he cares for his children. Similar to how we mothers care for our young.

Like a bear whose cubs have been taken away, I will tear out your heart. I will devour you like a hungry lioness and mangle you like a wild animal. -- Hosea 13:8 God compares himself (herself?) to a mother animal. God is protective, fiercely protective. As a mother would if anyone tries to harm her children.

You neglected the Rock who had fathered you; you forgot the God who had given you birth. -- Deuteronomy 32:18 Here God describes himself as giving birth to Israel. Only women can give birth. This is a distinctively female image God is happy to use to describe himself.

He will say, "I have long been silent; yes, I have restrained myself. But now, like a woman in labor, I will cry and groan and pant. -- Isaiah 42:14 As we saw in Deuteronomy, God is a mother. God knows the pains of childbirth.

[GodasBoth] Now of course God didn't literally give birth to Israel. We've already mentioned that God doesn't have a body, that God doesn't have a sex. But again and again in the Bible, we see God happy to use *female* metaphors to describe himself, to illustrate how he interacts with Israel. In all of these scripture we clearly see the picture of God as mother. Why? Because the image of God in women. Each of these scripture point to a view that God is female too.

So what does that mean for us? First, it affirms that *gender* is a good thing. We clearly have male and female for a reason. I love being a woman and a wife and a mother and a grandmother. This is who I was created to be. I was created to have all the traits and characteristics from the image of God. I was made in his image yet I still have the problem of self-doubt. Women in general really suffer from more than men. I know that before I came up here today I really thought about what I was going to wear and how it would be perceived. How I would look or would it give a different message than I wanted to speak or did it make me look fat! I struggle every time I preach a sermon. I second guess myself, I am always critical and rarely think I am good enough. I am surrounded by very brilliant people and I always put myself way below all of them.

I recently started a mentoring program with Shannon Etheridge, a well known author and speaker. Through the application process I did not think that I would be chosen because so many really good people apply. I was selected but I thought that it was just because of who I knew not my merit. One of the first things that we had to do was read a book and take a test that defines our strengths and abilities. I watched the video lesson on the book, Shannon spoke about strengths are the abilities that God has given you. In my top 5 strengths was communication – meaning that I have a God given strength of communicating through writing and speaking.

I had this huge light bulb moment that my strengths are the very thing that I was created in the image of God. Where I am strong is what God intends me to use. This made a big impact on me the next time I spoke which was Easter Sunday. I prepared as I usually do and went over everything but then I got up to speak I knew that I was doing what I was created to do. I will always work on getting better, but I am able to have more confidence in my ability. My confidence as a woman comes from the fact that I'm made in the image of God.

That's where *your* confidence should come from too. Whether you're male or female, God is calling you to be who God created you to be. Male and female equally strong and equally gifted.

Males alone are not the image of God. Females alone are not the image of God. The image of God is male *and* female. We need each other and we need to honor each other.

[Stop] One of the biggest obstacles to confident women living out their calling with God is actually men. For some reason, many men are intimidated by confident women. Women who have a strong sense of who they are, who God made them to be. Women who stand by their convictions and aren't afraid to speak their minds. Men often call women like that a name that's not very nice (and rhymes with witch).

Shame on us. Shame on men who are too insecure to celebrate a woman who is living out who she was created to be. Shame on a man who can't handle someone else questioning his ideas or opinions. Shame on a man who has a scarcity of leadership, who feels threatened by a woman who is capable and confident.

Men, that is not who we should be toward our sisters, our coworkers, our bosses or employees. That's certainly not how we should treat our wives or girlfriends. And I'm confident you'd never stand for someone treating your mamma *or* daughter that way.

[partnership] We ought to celebrate and embrace the strong women in our lives. Whether they choose to lead in the home or in the workplace, in our social circles or our churches. We should revel in women who have discovered to God created them to be. We should crave women who stand shoulder to shoulder with us because we *need* them. We cannot be the image of God on our own. Male is only half the picture. We need the female!

For too long, the Church has followed the culture in keeping women down. We've denied women real leadership roles, any active influence. Our denomination is better than others - we at least ordain women. But even still we don't actually place ordained women in pastoral positions. And for at least the next four years, we do not have any women at the highest levels of our Denominational leadership. (We've only had *one* female general superintendent in our more than 100-year history).

I'm proud to be part of a church that has three female pastors and four female board members - that's 1/3 of our elected church leadership. But we can keep getting better. We need more women confident in who they are, who God has made them to be. Because when anyone - male or female - discovers their calling and steps into their God-given potential, amazing things happen.

[picture of Mother Theresa] Mother Theresa is someone that we have all heard of, we usually see her as a mild women that cared for widows and orphans. She was actually a strong woman that led an entire group of people back to what God had intended for all humankind. She founded the Missionaries of charities which is present in 130 countries. She spoke out, to all the male leaders of the church, against the substandard conditions of the hospice places in poor countries. She became the voice for people that the rest of the world wanted to ignore.

[picture Wynkoop] And I know many of you have never heard of Mildred Wynkoop, but she's probably the most important theologian in the Nazarene Church to have lived in the 20th century. You'll be hard-pressed to find a Nazarene pastor of our generation who hasn't read Wynkoop at some point in our education. Wynkoop is a woman who knew her calling and confidently stepped into it. Wynkoop is a person God has used to influence and shape countless pastors leading the Church of the Nazarene today.

The point is that both men and women ought to celebrate strong, confident women who follow God's call on them - whether that is raising children in the home or writing theology textbooks or serving the poorest of the poor.

Women have a lack of confidence, it plagues us in all that we do. Whatever we work towards we have a hard time moving forward because we constantly second guess ourselves or doubt that we will be successful. We compare ourselves to other people and don't find ourselves measuring up.

Men: will we continue to feel threatened by the success we see women having? Will we allow ourselves to feel demeaned, degraded or disposable when our wives, our sisters, our co-workers succeed?

[partnership picture] Men I would challenge you to celebrate the women around you. Stand with the women around, encourage them, challenge them, support them. Don't limit your concept of women by

the standards that society puts on them. Embrace the differences and support the sameness. Recognize that we were all created in the image of God together we reflect God.

Women: don't be afraid of your calling. If that's to raise a family, then be the best mom you can. If it's to work outside the home, don't be afraid to know who you are and be that person in the workplace. And above all, please please please learn how God has gifted and called you for God's kingdom. Heed the Spirit's voice in your life. Be part of what God is doing here. Don't let anyone tell you you're a second-class human, or that your gifts aren't as important or valuable as someone else's. As a Christian, as a pastor, as a man, I am telling you that we need you. Each of you. Don't rob the Church of the gifts God has given you. Step up.

Sheila: God is both male and female. God is father and mother. God is more than what our society or church tells us. We were made to reflect the image of God, we need to see God in us and other around us. We can see God more completely when we recognize that God is mother and father. To be created in the image of God means that we embrace all that God created in us. We are all able to stand in confidence through everything that God intended for us to be.

Communion SetUp

[Communion Slide] We come to Jesus' table to day as men and women who are on the same journey. We are reminded of Paul's words to the Church in Galatia: that in Christ, there is neither male nor female. This table is the great equalizer. We all approach equally lost, equally in need of Jesus' rescue.

We all approach equally loved and called by God to join in this meal. This meal reminds us that the night before Jesus died, he broke bread and gave it to his disciples. He told them it was his body, broken for us. For all of us. Male and female.

He also took a cup of wine and gave it to them, told them it was his blood poured out to reconnect all of us to God and to each other.

Everyone is equally welcome at Jesus' table. Everyone is equally called to Jesus' table. And everyone is equally called to leave this place and follow their calling in the world. You don't have to be a member here to receive this Communion meal. If God is calling you to the table, then you're welcome to come.

Benediction:

If you're male, go from this place today grateful God is both father and mother to you, that in God is everything you need. And in light of that, celebrate a strong woman in your life.

If you are female, go from this place in confidence that you are created in the image of God. Stand alongside our brothers and sisters created to reflect God.

Together: Go in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.