

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

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The Fierce Love of a Mothering God

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Beloved siblings in Christ, grace to you and peace from the One in whom we live, and move, and have our being. Amen.

In Acts 17, the Apostle Paul stands in Athens, surrounded by temples and ideologies, surrounded by competing images of what “god” must be like. And Paul says something so simple it’s almost staggering: God is not far away. God is not some distant ruler on a throne, untouched by our lives. God is the One “in whom we live and move and have our being.” The air in our lungs. The ground under our feet. The pulse of life itself.

Paul’s point is not just that God *exists*. Paul’s point is that God is *close*, so close that our lives are already wrapped up in God’s life. We are, fundamentally, unavoidably relational. We belong to One another because we belong to God.

And then we look at the world we’re living in. We see how human beings keep trying to build reality on the opposite story: the story that power means distance, dominance, control; that strength means the ability to take; that “real” authority means the right to coerce.

Recent headlines are another heartbreaking reminder. You may have seen reporting about an online “Rape Academy,” a place where men are trained, **trained**, to expect entitlement to other people’s bodies, to practice cruelty as a kind of masculinity, to treat violence like virtue. It’s horrifying. And it isn’t isolated. It echoes the same toxic patterns we recognize in fundamentalist cults that abuse patriarchal biblical norms: where God is invoked to justify domination, where scripture is twisted into a weapon, where “authority” becomes a holy word for control.

So today, with Paul and with Jesus, we are going to name a contrast that matters for the soul, and for the safety of our neighbors. We will contrast the idol of a coercive, hypermasculine deity with the true nature of God: **a fiercely loving, mothering**

parent; a God who chooses “power-with” over “power-over,” who stands in risky solidarity with the vulnerable, and who draws near not to conquer but to heal. Power-over breaks the will; power-with builds the world. Power-over requires a victim; power-with requires a partner.

There is an idol that keeps showing up in Christian history, sometimes with a Bible in its hand. It is the idol of coercion; a god imagined as the ultimate strongman. A god of violent force and rigid control. A god who needs to be feared more than loved. A god who “wins” by crushing.

That theology has been shaped, again and again, by toxic masculinity; by the human delusion that power is meant to be exercised *over* others. And because we humans are so skilled at projection, we take that delusion and we paint it onto the face of God.

But Jesus comes to tear off that mask. Because when we worship a possessive, punishing, patriarchal god, it doesn’t stay in our hymnals. It bears fruit in our culture.

It leads to a society that excuses male violence; one that shrugs at abuse as “boys being boys,” that protects the powerful, that teaches survivors to be quiet for the sake of “peace.” It becomes a world that can ritualize Bathsheba’s rape as if it were merely a moral lesson about David’s temptation instead of a story about power abusing the vulnerable. It becomes a world that coddles rapists, minimizes assault, and refuses to hold “great men” accountable.

That is not the gospel. That is exactly what Martin Luther warned against, a theology of glory, calling evil good and good evil, decorating domination with spiritual language. And the cross exposes it. The cross names what it is. The cross says that God is not allied with empire’s violence. God is found with the violated, not the violators. God is not the author of coercion. God is the judge of it.

So we need to say this clearly, as a matter of faithfulness and as a matter of safety: **To whatever extent masculinity serves the purpose of dominance and control, it is fundamentally unsuitable for describing our Creator.** God’s authority is not the crushing weight of empire. God’s authority is mutual care, relationship, and uncoerced love.

And now we turn to the Gospel reading, to John 14. Jesus is preparing the disciples for his departure. They are afraid. They are bracing for abandonment. They are wondering what power looks like now. And Jesus gives a command: “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” But listen, this is not the kind of command the world understands.

Worldly power says, *Do what I say or else*. Worldly power demands obedience and enforces it with threat.

But Jesus, though he is a man living in a patriarchal world, does not use his power to coerce. Show me a moment in the gospels where Jesus forces compliance. He invites. He calls. He heals. He tells the truth. He confronts the powerful. He makes room at the table. He weeps. He walks toward the cross rather than away from it.

In John 14, Jesus is not handing out an ultimatum. Jesus is describing a relationship. Love is not produced by terror. Love cannot be extracted. Love can only be given freely and received freely. Jesus’ command is a command that does not violate the beloved.

And then Jesus makes a promise: “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate.” An Advocate. A defender. The Spirit of Truth.

Not an enforcer sent to keep people in line. Not a celestial police force to maintain the status quo. The Advocate comes to *tell the truth*, and to stand with those who have been lied about, minimized, silenced, or harmed.

If the Spirit is the Spirit of Truth, then the Spirit will not bless our denial. If the Spirit is the Advocate, then the Spirit will not comfort abusers in their abuse. If the Spirit is the presence of God among us, then the Spirit will lead the Church to speak, to protect, to interrupt, and to repent, structurally, not just sentimentally.

So now we ask, if God’s gaze is not the rapacious gaze of a conqueror, then what is God’s gaze? Jesus teaches us to discard the image of God as a king demanding loyalty and to receive God as a caregiver gathering kin.

The Scriptures are full of this: God as a mother who cannot forget the child at the breast. God as a hen gathering chicks under her wings. God as a midwife. God as the One who knit us together; womb-work, tender work, careful work.

This is not sentimental. This is not “soft.” This is fierce. Because a mothering God is not passive in the face of violence. A mothering God does not shrug at an online “Rape Academy.” A mothering God does not call coercion “just the way things are.” A mothering God is not a punishing patriarch who keeps order by threatening the children.

Instead, imagine God as the Caretaker, Mama, who shoves the kids behind her when danger appears. That’s not weakness. That is courage. That is protection. That is “power-with.”

And yes, scripture also gives us language for God’s justice that is vivid, even terrifying in its intensity; like a mother bear robbed of her cubs (Hosea 13:8). Not random rage. Not cruelty. But **holy vengeance rooted in justice**, a refusal to make peace with what destroys God’s children. God’s anger is the heat of a mother’s love refusing to let her child be consumed. It is a ‘No’ that creates space for a ‘Yes.’ Because the opposite of love is not anger. The opposite of love is indifference.

A mothering God is not indifferent. God’s fierce love tears at the systems that devour. God’s fierce love disrupts closed circles of violence. God’s fierce love exposes what has been hidden in the dark. God’s fierce love breaks the spell that tells survivors, “This is normal,” and tells abusers, “You will never be held accountable.”

So what happens when we reject the toxic masculinity of the world; when we refuse the idol of coercion, domination, extraction, control? We are left with a God who is intimately close.

Not the god who loves power most, but the One who loves *most*. The mystic Mechthild of Magdeburg imagined God speaking to the soul: “When you cry for me, I take you into my arms. When you love me, we are united as one.”

That is the heartbeat of the gospel. God does not relate to us by threat. God does not “win” by violating. God does not demand love at gunpoint. God draws near; Advocate, Comforter, Spirit of Truth, and says, *You are not alone. You belong. You are held.*

And because we are held, we can tell the truth. Because we are held, we can repent, not only privately, but structurally. Because we are held, we can dismantle rape

culture and patriarchal control where it shows up; whether in our jokes, our silence, our institutions, our complicity, our theologies that protect the powerful. We can hold abusers accountable. We can believe survivors. We can make our communities safer. We can speak truth to power as Christ did, without becoming coercive ourselves.

So hear the good news, and let it settle into your bones: You do not have to be alone. You do not have to be afraid of God. You do not have to confuse domination with holiness.

You can rest in the fierce, abiding arms of your Creator:
in an **unconditional, non-compulsory love**
a love that will not let violence have the last word,
a love that will not let empire define “strength,”
a love that comes close enough to heal.

In the name of the Mothering God, Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit. Amen.