

Have we talked about “clobber passages” before? Clobber passages are the parts of the Bible people use to beat other people up, and they’re mostly aimed at LGBTQ+ folks. There’s not actually that many clobber passages, but they get deployed as if the entirety of scripture’s contained in those verses. Well, Jesus’s argument with the Pharisees here’s one of ‘em. In their attempt to get Jesus to make a gaffe, they ask what he thinks about divorce. Jesus suggests recalling why Moses allowed it: God made a covenant with the people, but they got mean enough that having the option became a necessity. He even uses the same language as Pharaoh and his hatred: their hearts are hardened. Jesus then references Genesis: “male and female, God created them in God’s image.” There are two cudgels in this passage. First, what Jesus says gets used to prevent and/or shame divorces, often without nuance. But the other’s less obvious. “Male and female, God created them in God’s image” gets used to say that marriage is only between a man and a woman AND that male and female is all there is, at least all there is in God’s image. These target women and queer and gender nonconforming people uniquely. But focusing on divorce and male-or-female creatures misses the point. I’d like to pull the focus back and see if we can make better sense of why these cudgels aren’t all that useful, and to do that, we need to look at the Creation Myth.

In the beginning was a time before divorce existed, before marriage existed. It’s the Garden of Eden, everything’s perfect, plants are lush, animals romp, and God decides to create a new thing: Adam. The Hebrew word, *Adamah*, doesn’t mean man. It means earth or a thing made from dirt. While we often think Adam is synonymous with male, it’s better to think of Adam as the first “earthling,” the first thing made out of dirt. There actually isn’t any mention of Adam’s gender at first. Adam’s just that earthling, that dirt-made-thing romping around the garden with all the other critters. It’s only after God creates Eve from Adam’s rib that he’s called a “he.” Eve’s a “she” pretty much from her first breath. That should get your wheels turning. If Adam was not explicitly male AND God created female by taking a part of Adam out, then Adam originally contained both male and female. It’s only when the two are separated that we get an embodied distinction. Adam and Eve are humanity split in two, and once they’re cast out and stories in the real world begin, marriage becomes a sort of Humpty Dumpty attempt at putting humanity back together again. In that sense, marriage was a symbol of the reconstructed perfection of the first earthling. If that’s all we’re talking about, maybe we can see why divorce was a problem for Jesus; divorce is the re-undoing of Adam and Eve’s Humpty Dumpty humanity. Hard hearts lead to anger, violence, brutality, and oppression. That’s the problem. Also, remember that divorce then and divorce now are not the same thing. It’s only since the 1979 Prayer Book that the church has said marriage is for the couple’s “mutual joy and affection.” For ancient people, marriage was primarily about reproduction. So, divorce wasn’t just an insult to God’s model in Eden; it was an insult to the survival of the future People of God.

There’s more. Throughout scripture, God’s referred to as the groom to the People of God’s bride. That’s not to say God’s male anymore than all of God’s People are female. It just means that God and the People are like a married couple, committed to each other in perfect relationship...that is, until the hardness of humanity’s heart gets in the way. The prophets say the People commit adultery, even turn their back and abandon the groom. Again, maybe you can see why Jesus wouldn’t like divorce; when every marriage is a microcosm of the relationship between humanity and the divine, divorce becomes a rupture of promises made to God. The Pharisees want to talk about the minutiae of legalistic scriptural interpretations, and Jesus wants to talk about loyalty to that God.

It's easy to get so focused on the argument that we forget its core: the only reason this is even up for debate is because people can be really mean, and the hardness of their hearts requires adaptation. But if we weren't so mean, we wouldn't need those adaptations. That's the issue. For Jesus, divorce is a symptom of the disease of cruelty. He would've had no concept of modern marriage or modern divorce. He wouldn't've been concerned with mutual joy and affection. He wouldn't've known about amicable divorces or irreconcilable differences. He wouldn't've known about people that still love each other but just can't be married any longer. What he knew was divorce as a result of cruelty, and he hated the hardness of the hearts at the root. I can understand that. I wish more people could see the kind of nuance provided by context and history.

Okay, while that just scratches the surface of the divorce question, I want to shift a little to look at the other cudgel, the "male and female in God's image" part. Some use Adam and Eve to justify their claim that homosexual and transgender people are wrong. The argument's fairly straightforward. Genesis says they are male and female, created in God's image. But right off the bat, we're faced with a confusing situation. If (and this is a mighty big "if") the point of humanity being created in God's image is gender, that raises some questions. Is God male? Despite what the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel would have you believe, no, God is not male. So, does that mean God's female? No, God is not female. Sorry, Beyonce. God isn't a woman in a seashell covered with strategically draped fabric any more than God is an old man with a beard. So, if God is neither male nor female, God is both. Or neither. Or the entire spectrum. Or something that gender doesn't apply to at all. Forcing God into a human category is a fool's errand. God's bigger than that. What matters is that we are created in the image of God, not what parts we end up with. Could it be that God is trans? Much as I would like to say yes in solidarity with my trans brothers and sisters, also no. God is beyond the binary of gender, becomes human in the fully human body of Jesus, and takes on all it means to be human, including adopting a gender God wasn't before. It's probably better to say God is trans-divine or trans-human than transgender, but again, it's not all that helpful.

You might point to scriptures that call God "Father" as the final say on what God's gender is. But scripture's richer than that. According to scripture, God is Father, but God's also husband, king, midwife, pregnant woman, woman in labor, nursing mother, warrior, a hen, a mother eagle, a whirlwind, a column of fire, The God with Breasts (that's what El Shaddai means), and even a plain ol' rock. Many of these images are so downplayed that most don't know them. And that's not an accident. Over the course of Christian History, we've chosen to emphasize the masculine and downplay the feminine. Christians have forced a gender onto God that God does not conform to, and this gender nonconforming God shifts imagery and outward presentation more easily and considerably faster than many of us can follow.

The doctrine of the Trinity muddies the gender question further. You can avoid gender when talking about the mysterious Three-in-One by referring to the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd persons. But we don't usually do that. Instead, we talk about Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Father and Son, obviously, use masculine language. But the Spirit? Turns out the word is feminine, *Sophia*. The Trinity itself contains language for both. Based just on that, God's kinda male and kinda female. We might say God's non-binary, intersex, or genderfluid. But remember, God's bigger than all that. God's bigger than any gender and any human spectrum. God's not exactly nonbinary, not because God's definitively male, but because "nonbinary" is a human categorization just like every other category that describes what it means to be human.

Modern Christians get so riled up about all sorts of categories and then point to scripture to justify their anger, cruelty, and hatred. And those become cudgels to beat each other with. Let's go back to Jesus and those Pharisees and where their debate goes. If the gender of God, the gender of the people, or the status of a broken marriage in that passage keeps us from seeing the overall point, we're missing it. It's not about divorce, and it's

not about queer folks. It's about human cruelty. Focusing on the minutiae and categories so we don't have to talk about that meanness proves Jesus's point.

The point is that all of humanity, regardless of categorizations, all of us are created in the image of God. In spite of our potential for meanness, we carry great potential for good, great potential for love, and great, even unending, potential for creation. When we see each other, we look past our categories and deep into people's hearts where we find a sliver of the image of God unique to them. Their unique sliver and my unique sliver and your unique sliver and yours and yours come together to create an ever-fuller, ever-expanding understanding of what God is. Every person I meet has the potential to show me something new of what being created in the image of God means. It's like we've finally found our way back to Eden, and if we can get ourselves out of the way, we'll get to put this Humpty Dumpty of humanity back together again as the fullness of humanity piecing together the fullness of God.