

# **Metaphors for God: The Characteristics of Metaphor and the Use of Metaphor in Contemporary Women's Preaching**

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**Abstract:** *In academic writing, feminist theologians use various techniques for referring to God. For example, Rosemary R. Ruether uses the term "God/ess" and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza "G\*d," but both of these written variations are problematic in verbal prayers, liturgies and sermons.<sup>1</sup> In 1987, Sallie McFague explored metaphor as an appropriate method for speaking about God. This article explores seven characteristics of metaphor based on the work of Sallie McFague, Sandra Schneiders and Ruth Duck. This article then briefly details the results and implications of a survey of women's sermons, read in light of the seven characteristics of metaphor.*

## **Introduction**

During my undergraduate degree I spent two summers teaching children about the Bible, church and other areas of faith. One session specifically focused on God. During this session I had many painful moments meeting children who themselves were African American or Asian, but who believed that God *must* be white. At other times I met young girls who believed that God *must* be male. Some of my most rewarding moments were showing those children the diversity of the biblical metaphors for God. Homiletics is my current academic focus, and I again find myself questioning whether or not preachers communicate a diversity of metaphors for God to congregants both young and old.

Metaphor is one method for speaking about God that provides for creativity, diversity, and experimentation while recognizing that anything that we say about God is partial, fragmentary and incomplete. Sallie McFague's *Models of God* highlights the importance of metaphors in describing God. McFague argues that the language we use for God "needs revision" because "all language about God is human construction and as such perforce 'misses the mark.'"<sup>2</sup> In a similar approach, but specifically addressing the context liturgy, Ruth Duck in *Gender and the Name of God* writes, "the use of the term 'God' signals metaphorical use of language. Such terms as 'rock,' 'father,' 'mother,' or 'love' can refer literally to human experience, but when they refer to God they become metaphors, not literal, cognitive statements. God is neither rock nor human being, and God shows love in ways that transcend human love."<sup>3</sup> We use metaphorical language for God not because of its clarity or cleverness, but because metaphorical language expresses that which cannot be conveyed with literal language. Sandra Schneiders in *The Revelatory Text* states it clearly: metaphors are "not merely a rhetorical device. Metaphor... is an instrument of new meaning, a way of achieving genuine semantic innovation."<sup>4</sup> This paper considers seven characteristics central to metaphorical language,

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<sup>1</sup> Mary C. Grey, *Introducing Feminist Images of God* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2001), 113.

<sup>2</sup> Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 20, 23.

<sup>3</sup> Ruth C. Duck, *Gender and the Name of God: The Trinitarian Baptismal Formula* (New York: Pilgrim, 1991), 13.

<sup>4</sup> Sandra Marie Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*, 2nd ed. (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1999), 29.

whether or not these characteristics are already present in women's sermons and the implications of those characteristics that are currently absent from preaching.

### Characteristics of Metaphors

Although various writers, both feminist and non-feminist, provide various ways of identifying or defining metaphors, I focus on Sallie McFague's characteristics of metaphors and, where appropriate, Duck's and Schneiders' work. I concentrate on McFague's work for two reasons. First, her work builds on the history of metaphor and incorporates previous scholarship into her metaphorical theology. Second, McFague, unlike other authors, specifically relates metaphor to language for God. McFague is a pioneer in combining feminist theology, language for God, and metaphor, and so at times I turn to the work of Schneiders and Duck, who expand upon the instability, or the "is" and the "is not," characteristic of metaphors, which the older McFague work does not address directly.

McFague identifies seven characteristics of metaphors for God. These seven characteristics include metaphors that are appropriate to the current context and which are also heuristic, experimental, imagistic, pluralistic, unstable, and which remythologize theological concepts. Heuristic, experimental, imagistic and appropriateness for the current context are less prominent in general theology so I, therefore, refer to them as minor characteristics. Metaphors as pluralistic, remythologizing and unstable are more prominent because other scholars, such as Schneiders and Duck, identify them as key characteristics. As a result, I refer to them as major characteristics.

#### *i. Minor Characteristics*

*Heuristic:* A metaphor can be heuristic in two distinct ways. First, a metaphor can be heuristic because it grows out of experience. Sallie McFague relies on the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* for her definition of heuristic; heuristic as an adjective means "serving to find out" and as a noun "a system of education under which pupils are trained to find out for themselves."<sup>5</sup> In other words, heuristic language develops out of an individual's experiences of testing, experimenting and exploring. Since heuristic metaphors grow out of experience, they "will not accept on the basis of authority but will acknowledge only what it finds convincing and persuasive."<sup>6</sup> Heuristic metaphors must reflect life's experiences in order to be persuasive. Second, a metaphor can be heuristic when it adapts traditional material for today's context. Heuristic metaphors form "unconventional metaphors" appropriate for the current context by building upon and diverging from tradition and traditional material, such as the Bible. Mercy Amba Oduyoye's metaphor of God as a great householder is an example of a heuristic metaphor for God from an African context.<sup>7</sup> As a motherly householder, God is "caring, providing, helping, sharing, and 'ministering' to the needs of others."<sup>8</sup> Reflecting on Oduyoye's work, Anne

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<sup>5</sup> McFague, *Models of God*, 36.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> For more on this metaphor see Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "The African Experience of God through the Eyes of an Akan Woman," *Cross Currents* 47, Winter (1997). Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology* (Cleveland: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).

<sup>8</sup> Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology*, 46. God is a "motherly householder" because as Mary Grey notes, the majority of "hospitality in our homes rests on the labour of women. In many countries – even if in the West this is slowly changing – it is still true that the women who prepare the meals do not eat with the guests – as it

Clifford, in *Introducing Feminist Theology*, says, “God...is imaged as the ‘Great Householder’ who empowers all as children in a parent’s home and around the one common table. At home with God, they experience all that is just and life-giving.”<sup>9</sup>

*Experimental:* A metaphor for God should be experimental, “willing to play with possibilities” and “not take itself too seriously.”<sup>10</sup> There is a “greater emphasis on its tentative, relative, partial, and hypothetical character.”<sup>11</sup> Metaphors for God should address the salvific power of God; however, the metaphors should do so in a “playful, experimental, tentative way.”<sup>12</sup> Oduyoye provides another metaphor for God, which is particularly experimental. She states that God is like the tail on a tail-less animal, driving off the flies.<sup>13</sup> This experimental metaphor displays the love, care and concern of God for something as undeserving as the comfort of cattle.

*Imagistic:* Metaphors for God should be imagistic. McFague points out that to say metaphors are imagistic seems to state the obvious. However, it is important to emphasize the imagistic nature of metaphors because “of the bias of constructive theology toward conceptual clarity, often at the price of imagistic richness.”<sup>14</sup> As theologians and as preachers we tend to speak in abstract concepts: we design creeds and doctrines rather than imagery and poetry. McFague, however, believes that it is images that are influential and persuasive. McFague provocatively writes,

concepts without images are sterile. It is no coincidence that most religious traditions turn to personal and public human relationships to serve as metaphors and models of the relationship between God and the world: God as father, mother, lover, friend, king, lord, governor. These metaphors give a precision and persuasive power to the construct of God which concepts alone cannot. Because religions, including Christianity, are not incidentally imagistic but centrally and necessarily so, theology must also be an affair of the imagination.<sup>15</sup>

Metaphors are necessarily imagistic because images are persuasive; images influence our beliefs and behaviors because images, unlike concepts, are dynamic and fertile.<sup>16</sup>

*Appropriate for the Current (World) Context:* Perhaps the cornerstone of McFague’s argument for new metaphors for God is her conviction that we must find metaphors for God that are appropriate for our current context. In our modern context “we live most of the time and in

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would have been in the time of Jesus and the New Testament Churches.” (Grey, *Introducing Feminist Images of God*, 81.)

<sup>9</sup> Anne M. Clifford, *Introducing Feminist Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001), 124.

<sup>10</sup> McFague, *Models of God*, 37.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 37-38.

<sup>13</sup> Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women’s Theology*, 50.

<sup>14</sup> McFague, *Models of God*, 38.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> The biblical metaphor for God as an eagle has been a powerful metaphor for the African-American church and is an example of an imagistic metaphor. See Johanna W. H. Van Wijk-Bos, *Reimagining God: The Case for Scriptural Diversity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 66, 70.

most ways by outmoded, anachronistic names. We are not naming ourselves, one another, and our earth in ways commensurate with *our own times* but are using names from a bygone time.”<sup>17</sup>

## ii. Major Characteristics

*Plurality:* McFague argues that many metaphors for God are necessary because “no metaphor or model refers properly or directly to God.”<sup>18</sup> In fact, every metaphor for God is “inappropriate, partial and inadequate; the most that can be said is that some aspect or aspects of the God-world relationship are illuminated by this or that model.”<sup>19</sup> Plurality of metaphors is critical for several reasons. First, from a pastoral perspective, a plurality of metaphors for God help preachers relate to a diverse congregation. McFague writes, metaphors are “likely accounts of experiences of relating to God with the help of relationships we know and understand.”<sup>20</sup> Second, a diversity of metaphors for God should illuminate the various aspects of God rather than providing several pliant, individualized versions of God. A plurality should open up new possibilities for understanding God rather than providing a different God for each person according to their preferences. Finally, plurality challenges existing metaphors for God and in doing so prevents select metaphors from becoming normative.<sup>21</sup>

*Remythologizing:* McFague begins her own analysis of metaphors by stating that metaphors remythologize, which means they “refuse the attempt to denude religious language of its concrete, poetic, imagistic, and hence inevitably anthropomorphic, character, in the search for presumably more enlightened (and usually more abstract) terminology.”<sup>22</sup> In other words, metaphors for God must maintain and create the language of images, poetics and human experience. She states that theologians are neither poets nor philosophers: they are both.<sup>23</sup> They are poets because they must be “sensitive to the metaphors...that are at once consonant with the Christian faith and appropriate for expressing that faith in their own time” and they are philosophers because they “must elucidate in a coherent, comprehensive, and systematic way the implications of these metaphors.”<sup>24</sup> It is not enough to form abstract language for God, nor is it enough to form beautiful pictures of God. Rather, theologians must develop metaphors for God on both “imagistic and conceptual levels.”<sup>25</sup>

*The Instability of Metaphors:* The tension between what a metaphor illuminates and what a metaphor does not illuminate makes metaphors unstable. Metaphors are “very unstable linguistic entities. They exist in and even as linguistic tension involving a simultaneous affirmation and negation of the likeness between the two terms of the metaphor.”<sup>26</sup> Schneiders

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<sup>17</sup> McFague, *Models of God*, 38. A metaphor for our current context, particularly adolescent females, is the metaphor of voice explored in Mary Lin; Turner Hudson, Mary Donovan, *Saved from Silence: Finding Women's Voice in Preaching* (St. Louis: Chalice, 1999), 85-87.

<sup>18</sup> McFague, *Models of God*, 38-39. Van Wijk-Bos, *Reimagining God*, 35.

<sup>19</sup> McFague, *Models of God*, 39.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Sally Brown argues preaching should include a variety of images for God. Brown argues from a theological perspective, particularly examining the trinity. (Sally A. Brown, “Speaking Again of the Trinity,” *Theology Today* 64, no. 2 (2007): 154.)

<sup>22</sup> McFague, *Models of God*, 32.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. The Womanist work on the metaphor for God as someone who provides the means for survival is an example of remythologizing. See Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), 21, 198.

<sup>26</sup> Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*, 29.

refers to these two aspects as the tension between the literal and the absurd, or the “is” and the “is not.”<sup>27</sup> Schneiders explains that metaphors, “because their power derives from the tension between the two interpretations, are unstable. The metaphor lives in the struggle between the “is” of the prediction and the “is not” that the recognition of literal absurdity insinuates immediately into our perception.”<sup>28</sup> In other words, metaphor is not a definition but, rather, a pairing of two ideas. This pairing provides points of similarity, the “is like” or the literal, and points of dissimilarity, the “is not like” or the absurd.<sup>29</sup> Together, the pair provides new insights, and a new way of viewing both aspects of the metaphor. Duck writes, “metaphors bring forward unnoticed dimensions of reality by forging connections where they would not ordinarily be expected. They can stretch the limits of human thought and perception so that we grasp new meanings... By creating an apparent contradiction, they lure persons toward a new perception of some reality. This is how they communicate meaning.”<sup>30</sup>

When this tension is present and active the metaphor is alive. Duck writes, “in a live metaphor, the tension between the juxtaposed terms is still perceived and therefore can lure toward new discovery of meaning... At first, a metaphor may seem so shocking as to evoke disbelief; then, when it is a living metaphor, through tension it evokes insight.”<sup>31</sup> Living metaphors shock, challenge our preconceptions and lead us to new discoveries. When either the “is” or the “is not” is absent from a metaphor, the metaphor dies. A dead metaphor “has little power to evoke new perceptions because it has become so commonplace.”<sup>32</sup> Dead metaphors can either be literalized or banalized. Banalized metaphors are those metaphors that have been repeatedly used and no longer spark the imagination.<sup>33</sup> Schneiders describes a banalized metaphor as a living metaphor that “has been repeated often enough that it loses its capacity to surprise, to tease the imagination into the engagement of new possibilities.”<sup>34</sup> With repeated use metaphors begin to sound “trite.” For example, “to speak of looking into the depths of someone’s eyes is to use a trite metaphor.”<sup>35</sup> The second type of dead metaphor, literalized metaphor, is more dangerous. In a literalized metaphor the “is not” is suppressed in favor of the “is” aspect. In other words, “the literalized metaphor goes underground and works on the subconscious level creating vast reservoirs of cognitive untruth and distorted affectivity.”<sup>36</sup> Schneiders calls literalized metaphors the “cancer of the religious imagination, powerfully and pathologically at work.”<sup>37</sup>

The presence of dead metaphors in the language of the church is perhaps the single most important impetus for critiquing metaphors for God. Terms such as “Father God” have completely lost the “is not” and have become literalized. Rather than recognizing that God is like

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<sup>27</sup> Clifford, *Introducing Feminist Theology*, 102; Duck, *Gender and the Name of God*, 14; McFague, *Models of God*, 35; Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*, 31.

<sup>28</sup> Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*, 31.

<sup>29</sup> For example, Jesus as a shepherd to humanity is a metaphor. The metaphorical meaning being Jesus *is* a shepherd because he guides us, protects us, and leads us to spiritual food and drink. The literal meaning is absurd because Jesus “*is not*” like a shepherd, in that we are not sheep and Jesus does not raise us for food, shave us for clothes, or eat us.

<sup>30</sup> Duck, *Gender and the Name of God*, 14.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*, 29. Duck, *Gender and the Name of God*, 19. McFague, *Models of God*, 35.

<sup>34</sup> Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*, 29.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

a father, and that God is not like a father, the church has, historically, literalized the metaphor, thereby confining God to being male and father to the exclusion of other metaphors. Duck writes, “sometimes, when the tensive quality of a metaphor referring to God is lost, people assume a particular way of speaking about God to be literally true. They forget that God is both like and unlike whatever human terms are used to speak about God.”<sup>38</sup> In other words, banalized metaphors sound trite, literalized metaphors speak in absolutes: both are dead metaphors, unable to produce new juxtapositions and meanings.

### Metaphors Utilized in Preaching

As a part of my research into metaphors and preaching I conducted a survey of women’s sermons. My survey consisted of fourteen sermon collections and selections from the Walter Allum Sermon Collection in the McKay Resource Centre in the Caven Library, located at Knox College, Toronto, Ontario, as well as the women featured by the Great Preachers video series.<sup>39</sup> The earliest collection was published in 1983 and the most recent in 2008. These fourteen collections represent more than 330 sermons written by approximately 290 different women.

I specifically choose women’s sermons for a variety of reasons. First, although systematic theologians, pastoral counselors and Bible scholars address masculine language for God, homiletics scholars have yet to conduct an in depth study of the use of metaphors for God in preaching. Second, although various homileticians have studied some of the ways women’s preaching differs from men’s preaching, the specific metaphors for God used in actual sermons have not been explored. Third, Duck argues that women must participate in “symbol making.”<sup>40</sup> Symbol making is “the process of interpreting human life and history through public speech, writing, and ritual.”<sup>41</sup> She asserts that the church has historically prohibited most women from symbol making since it “has excluded women from planning and leading worship, as well as from public theological reflection. Women were not part of the fourth-century church councils that so greatly influenced the language of Christian worship.”<sup>42</sup> An analysis of the metaphors of women’s sermons provided one means for exploring whether or not women participate in “symbol making” in their preaching. The results of the survey were startling.

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<sup>38</sup> Duck, *Gender and the Name of God*, 17.

<sup>39</sup> Carole Ann Camp, *From Flicker to Flame: Women’s Sermons for the Revised Common Lectionary. Year A*, 2 vols., vol. 1 (South Deerfield: Ash Grove, 1995). Jana Childers, *Birthing the Sermon: Women Preachers on the Creative Process* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2001); David Albert Farmer and Edwina Hunter, *And Blessed Is She: Sermons by Women* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990); J. Dorcas Gordon, Margaret MacNaughton, and Presbyterian Church in Canada. Women in Ministry Committee., *Counting the Women: Sermons by Women* (North York: Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1994). Lee Hancock, ed. *A Book of Women’s Sermons: Hearing God in Each Other’s Voices* (New York: Riverhead, 1999); Annie Lally Milhaven, *Sermons Seldom Heard: Women Proclaim Their Lives* (New York: Crossroad, 1991). Susan Durber and Heather Walton, *Silence in Heaven: A Book of Women’s Preaching* (London: SCM, 1994); Ella Pearson Mitchell and Jacqueline B. Glass, ed. *Those Preaching Women*, vol. 4 (Valley Forge: Judson, 2004); Ella Pearson Mitchell, *Those Preaching Women*, 4 vols. (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1985); Ella Pearson Mitchell, ed. *Those Preaching Women: More Sermons by Black Women Preachers* vol. 2 (Valley Forge: Judson, 1988); Ella Pearson Mitchell, ed. *Those Preaching Women: African American Preachers Tackle Tough Questions* vol. 3 (Valley Forge: Judson, 1996); Ella Pearson Mitchell and Valerie Bridgeman Davis, *Those Preaching Women: A Multicultural Collection*, 1st ed. (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2008); *Spinning a Sacred Yarn: Women Speak from the Pulpit*, (New York: Pilgrim, 1982).

<sup>40</sup> Duck adapts the term “symbol making” from Gerda Lerner.

<sup>41</sup> Duck, *Gender and the Name of God*, 102.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

*i. General Observations on Metaphors in the Sermon Collections*

After reading the sermons, three aspects concerning the use of God language deserve attention. First, many preachers, especially in the collections that specifically state that they were dealing with “hard topics,” spend considerable time critiquing the historical names, characteristics and metaphors for God. The maleness of God, the judgmental, vengeful, and violent aspects of God often come under critique. More often than not, however, the preachers who refute traditional metaphors for God do not propose alternatives. Second, overwhelmingly, the most common way to speak of God is through God’s actions. Frequently preachers use God as the subject of a sentence, and then add a verb. For example, God loves, God walks, God speaks, God calls. Preachers also frequently use God as a possessive noun. For example, God’s will, God’s plan, God’s desire, God’s hands. Finally, there is a plethora of dead metaphors for God in the sermons. Since there are too many to name I label two particular groups: the body parts of God and God the parent. The body parts of God include metaphors for God as a hand, voice, feet, wings, head, for example. The second aspect, God as parent, has become literalized, reflected in the phrase “we are the children of God.” It seems to be acceptable to state that we are children of God without exploring the rather shocking implications of having the ultimate being in the universe as our parent, or the ramifications of humanity understood as children without responsibility or accountability.

*ii. Specific Observations on Sermons Encompassing All Characteristics of Metaphor*

Four sermons from the sermon sample display all of the characteristics of metaphor.<sup>43</sup> A selection of metaphors from one sermon include: the metaphor of God hanging on the gallows borrowed from Elie Wiesel, God as judge, God as someone who experiences birth, God as running a marathon, and a God who will both win and lose. In the same sermon, God will also be a battered wife, a child, a nigger and a faggot. The other three sermons included metaphors for God as a housekeeper, a church secretary, a gardener, a sentry, a shepherd, a winemaker, and a baker and eater of chocolate cakes. Although these sermons present a diversity of metaphors, they come from only four sermons and two of the four sermons are found in the earliest collection of sermons. The lack of sermons employing all of the characteristics of metaphor, especially in later collections, suggests that women preachers perhaps take fewer risks or use less creativity in speaking of God than the earlier women preachers.

*iii. Specific Observations on Sermons Encompassing Minor Characteristics of Metaphor*

The minor characteristics are well represented in the sermon sample. There are various sermons that use heuristic, experimental or imagistic metaphors. Some of the metaphors embodying these examples include God as a plaintiff, God as voice, God as the author of a love letter, God as laughter, and God as a gambler. The appropriate context is difficult to determine because I am removed from the original audience. Two jarring examples of questionably appropriate metaphors include God as a violent weapon and God as a doctor or lawyer.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> These sermons include Jean Armstrong, “A Love Song,” in *Counting the Women: Sermons by Women*, ed. J. Dorcas Gordon, Margaret MacNaughton, and Presbyterian Church in Canada. Women in Ministry Committee. (North York: Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1994); Rev. Dr. Dorothy Austin, “The Motherhood of God,” in *A Book of Women’s Sermons: Hearing God in Each Other’s Voices*, ed. Lee Hancock (New York: Riverhead, 1999); Linda Clark, “The Day’s Own Trouble,” (New York: Pilgrim, 1982); Carter Heyward, “The Enigmatic God,” in *Spinning a Sacred Yarn: Women Speak from the Pulpit* (New York: Pilgrim, 1982).

<sup>44</sup> Jo Ann Browning, “It’s a Good Thing!,” in *Those Preachin’ Women*, ed. Ella Pearson Mitchell (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1985).

McFague notes, given the current nuclear threat, metaphors that equate God to weapons have dangerous implications.<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, the metaphors for God as a doctor or a lawyer are perhaps inappropriate because, traditionally, both law and medicine are predominately male careers containing great authority, firmly established hierarchy and a rigidly guarded membership.

*iv. Specific Observations on Sermons Encompassing Major Characteristics of Metaphor*

The results of the survey identified that the major characteristics of metaphors were far less prevalent than the minor characteristics. In terms of plurality, by far the most common form within the sermon collections is the use of God as like both a father and a mother in a single sermon. It is important to note that although many sermons exemplify plurality through their use of the metaphors for God as a mother and father, few sermons demonstrate plurality by using non-traditional metaphors of parenting, such as God as a grandmother, grandfather, barren mother, or single mother. Sermons that combine a variety of seemingly unrelated metaphors for God are rare. And apart from the sermons that included all characteristics of metaphors, only one sermon included a plurality of distinct metaphors for God. In terms of remythologizing, a few preachers did participate in making abstract ideas concrete and both poetical and philosophical. For example, one sermon remythologizes the abstract concepts of being made in God's image and the perfection of God. The preacher tells a story of a student who wrote about a woman who had a stroke and after surgery was told that she would be fine but her face and her mouth would always be deformed. The story continues, "at the news, the woman began to cry and begged the doctor to do something because she felt so ugly and deformed. Just then, her husband... bent over and kissed her lips. As he did this, he positioned his own lips to the same twisted shape as hers so that their lips matched."<sup>46</sup> In this sermon "God takes on our twistedness."<sup>47</sup> A second sermon equates God to an abused woman saying, when "I was hit, God was hit; when I was bruised, God was bruised; when I could not bear the pain anymore, neither could God."<sup>48</sup> Finally, only one sermon apart from the four sermons which display all of the characteristics of metaphor refers to the "is" and the "is not" of metaphor. This particular sermon uses the metaphor of God as a homeless man who visits a particular congregation. This sermon identifies the instability of metaphors by stating that by referring to God as a homeless man, the preacher did "not mean to be sentimental about homeless people, or to say that God purposely makes people homeless to be teachers for the rest of us! Nor do I claim that Emmett [the name of the homeless man] is really Jesus in disguise... But at the very least Emmett has become for me and for our congregation a parable [or metaphor] of God and Jesus making a home with us."<sup>49</sup>

The sermons of women preachers in this study reflect McFague's characteristics of metaphor. Characteristics such as the heuristic, experimental and imagistic aspects of metaphors are much more common than the characteristics of plurality, remythologizing and instability. The instability of metaphors is the least represented characteristic. It is also critically important to

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<sup>45</sup> McFague, *Models of God*, 14-17.

<sup>46</sup> Rev. Dr. Joan E. Hemenway, "Beyond Belief," in *A Book of Women's Sermons: Hearing God in Each Other's Voices* ed. Lee Hancock (New York: Riverhead, 1999).

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>48</sup> Susan Hagood Lee, "Witness to Christ, Witness to Pain: One Woman's Journey through Wife Battering," in *Sermons Seldom Heard: Women Proclaim Their Lives*, ed. Annie Lally Milhaven (New York: Crossroad, 1991).

<sup>49</sup> Barbara Lundblad, "God's Homecoming," in *A Book of Women's Sermons: Hearing God in Each Other's Voices*, ed. Lee Hancock (New York: Riverhead, 1999).



note that only four sermons, three of which are specifically focused on the nature of God as the topic for the sermon, are strong examples of all of the characteristics.

## Implications

### *i. Experimental and Imagistic Metaphors*

Before surveying the field of women's preaching, I assumed that since feminist theologians were actively symbol making metaphors for God, women preachers would also be participating in symbol making. I also expected these results because vivid imagery, storytelling and experimental language are central tenants of many narrative preaching styles common in academia, and homiletic classrooms, since the 1960s. In terms of the minor characteristics of metaphor, such as metaphor as experimental and imagistic, women preachers fulfilled my expectations. The significance of experimental and imagistic metaphors for God in women's preaching means that women preachers are willing to take risks, play with ideas and to explore humanity's understanding of God.

### *ii. Heuristic and Contextually Appropriate Metaphors*

I expected the metaphors for God in women's sermons to be both heuristic and contextually appropriate. Recent homiletic scholarship emphasizes the importance of preaching which stands alongside the congregation, including both affirming and challenging congregations, according to their situation. As a result, I expected women to include metaphors that reflected their own experiences of God as well as their congregation's experiences of God.

The other minor characteristics, contextual appropriateness and heuristic metaphors for God, only partially fulfilled my expectations. My expectations were fulfilled in that several sermons reflected these characteristics. They were unfulfilled because the metaphors for God often reflected a limited selection of daily life, such as parenthood, and a small selection of the current context, such as spousal abuse. The results of this study lead me to speculate that the majority of preachers in this sermon sample and, I assume, non-preachers seem to be acculturated to view God primarily as transcendent. In terms of the Holy Trinity, Jesus was incarnated into the common, messy, daily life of humanity, and the Holy Spirit remains active in the world, so it seems that God's place in the Holy Trinity is the omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscience "other" who is somewhat removed from common daily events.

### *iii. Plurality*

I expected a diversity of metaphors for God as a reaction against years of the singular, normative use of God as father. It seems, however, that using God as mother or God as mother and father constitutes the extent of the plurality employed in many sermons. Plurality, however, means more than balancing gendered metaphors. McFague argues that all metaphors for God are inadequate, so combining a masculine and feminine metaphor for God does not produce a complete unit for understanding God.<sup>50</sup> Plurality requires a diversity of genders, ages, cultures, nationalities, levels of education, life experiences, as well as metaphors that include inanimate objects and animals. The limited metaphors for God in the women's sermons are particularly startling because plurality reinforces the instability of metaphors, thereby preventing particular metaphors from becoming normative. The shortage of metaphors for God as young or old people

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<sup>50</sup> McFague, *Models of God*, 30.

leads congregants to identify God as approximately twenty to forty years old and the absence of metaphors for God as poor creates a middle class or wealthy God as normative. Although masculine metaphors for God are no longer the sole authoritative metaphors, others, such as God as parent, approach the normative stature once held by God as father.

#### *iv. Remythologizing*

Although some sermons contain remythologized metaphors for God, the examples are relatively few compared to the overall size of the sermon sample. This absence is particularly surprising. Remythologizing metaphors for God is the heart of symbol making. It refuses to “denude religious language of its concrete, poetic, imagistic, and hence inevitably anthropomorphic, character.”<sup>51</sup> Remythologizing develops the symbols that are appropriate for our time and our context. As already stated above, Duck notes that women have been excluded from the act of symbol making, the act of remythologizing for centuries. I am surprised that women are not embracing the challenge, honor and responsibility of symbol making metaphors for God now that women have the opportunity. I suspect that this is because symbol making requires great effort. Symbol making requires women to challenge the traditional structures of males as the symbol makers. By claiming the right to symbol making women might confront the cultural and ecclesiastical backlash against feminism. Even when women finally accomplish the act of symbol making, they must act against the enculturation of both the church and culture that tends to teach women that their voice, including their acts of symbol making, have no meaning or are wrong. I imagine that challenging tradition, facing backlash, and overcoming years of enculturation on a weekly basis would be emotionally and psychologically exhausting.

#### *v. Instability*

Recognizing and honoring the instability of metaphors is the most neglected characteristic of the metaphors. Even the sermons encompassing all of the characteristics of metaphor use plurality in order to recognize instability rather than directly stating the absurd “is not” of the metaphor. Only one sermon in this study explores how God is like and is not like a homeless man, thus acknowledging both sides of the instability of metaphors.

Using metaphors for God without recognizing the instability is dangerous for two reasons. First, neglecting the instability is harmful because, as Schneiders writes, metaphors “derive” their power “from the tension.”<sup>52</sup> Metaphors without tension become dead metaphors, either banalized or literalized, without meaning. Second, since the “is not” of the metaphor is “absurd,” it is dangerous to disregard this aspect of the metaphor.<sup>53</sup> When a preacher does not address the “is not” of a metaphor, Schneiders states that the “absurdity insinuates immediately into our perception.”<sup>54</sup> In other words, when a preacher fails to acknowledge the “is not” of a metaphor for God, she requires the congregation to recognize and wrestle with the “is not” on their own or, worse, the congregation does not consider the “is not” and, in doing so, literalizes the metaphor or considers the metaphor normative.

Recognizing the “is not” nature of metaphor is the very reason for using metaphors to speak of God. The “is not” provides the tension and the room for creativity and experimentation. The “is not” acknowledges that we live in a fragmented world where every word, phrase, name

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>52</sup> Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*, 31.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.; Clifford, *Introducing Feminist Theology*, 102. McFague, *Models of God*, 35. Duck, *Gender and the Name of God*, 14.

<sup>54</sup> Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*, 31.

and image for God is incomplete. It is the “is” and the “is not” that lets us speak about God without claiming too much, without normalizing our experience, and without confining God to the incompleteness, brokenness and restricted nature of the human experience.

### **Conclusion**

Shaping metaphors for God that are heuristic, contextually appropriate, pluralistic and which remythologize is a challenging task, but it is also a playful act of the imagination that wrestles with speaking about what God is like when we know that God is not like anything or anyone. It is an honor, a privilege, and a responsibility. Through symbol making, we identify the presence of God in our midst and speak to the relationship between humanity and the divine. Symbol making metaphors for God ultimately attempts to speak the unspeakable, imagine the unimaginable, and grasp the unfathomable mystery that is our God: It is a great adventure.