

An Inclusive- Language Lectionary

Readings for Year A

Merits and Demerits of *An Inclusive Language Lectionary*

This is a transcript of a workshop presentation given by Virginia Ramey Mollenkott during the 1986 Fresno EWCI Conference (Free Indeed...Empowered for Action). It has been edited for clarity. Virginia was a member of the committee that created *An Inclusive Language Lectionary*.

by *Virginia Ramey Mollenkott*

Counting androcentric references

I would like someone to volunteer to read Luke 1:46-55 aloud to us. Luke 1:46-55. As she reads, what I would like us everybody to do is count on your fingers unabashedly. Count on your fingers, how many times you hear affirmations of maleness in this passage. Just count them up. So that would be any men's names, any use of the word man, or he, references to the deity as masculine. Anything like that. Count as an affirmation of maleness. Let's see whether we all match when we're finished here.

"And Mary said, my soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit is glad in God my Savior. For he took notice of the lowliness of his bond-slave. Consider from now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Almighty has done great things for me. His name is holy and his mercy is to those who reverence him through all generations. He exercised strength with his arm. He scattered the proud in their heart's imaginations. He dethroned princes and lifted up the lowly, the needy. He supplied to the full with good things and the rich he sent away empty-handed. He sustained Israel, his servant in remembrance of his mercy as he spoke to our fathers to Abraham and his descendants forever."

Okay. How many affirmations of maleness did you get? I got nineteen when I counted. That's the Gideon Bible of course, out of my room. It's the Revised Berkeley Version in Modern English (RBVME). I thought it would be a King James.

I checked a few other translations while I was home. King James had twenty, the Revised Standard Version (RSV) had twenty, and the New International Version (NIV), on which I worked, had seventeen.

No one was listening to any observations about the androcentric language during the creation of the NIV. In the first place, I didn't have much consciousness when I was working on it. But I did have some

consciousness by the end of the work, and still no one was listening. At least the count comes in a little lower. The RBVME comes in at nineteen.

I would like you now to listen to the same passage from *An Inclusive Language Lectionary*. My idea for this workshop is to read a couple of passages just to dramatize the need for the project. And then we can talk about the lectionary itself.

And if you want to know anything about the process or what went on behind the scenes and so forth, I'd be happy to explain it. I was with the project from beginning to end.

The reading started with verse 46, "And Mary said, my soul magnifies the Sovereign and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior who has regarded the lowest state God's handmaiden." I think we changed handmaiden to servant in our next go-round.

"For behold henceforth, all generations will call me blessed for the one who is mighty has done great things for me. And holy is God's name and God's mercy is on those who fear God from generation to generation. God has shown strength with God's arm and has scattered the proud and the imagination of their hearts. God has put down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of low degree. God has filled the hungry with good things and has sent the rich empty away. God has helped God's servant Israel in remembrance of God's mercy. As God spoke to our ancestors. To Abraham, Sarah, and their posterity forever."

How's that sound to you? Why is it awkward? It's murder trying to do without pronouns in the English language. And the people who accused the *Lectionary* of being awkward, I would just like to line them all up and have them take a shot at it. Much of the awkwardness, incidentally, that we have been blamed for is straight out of the Revised Standard Version. It's amazing the number.

We do have one committee member who's on the Revised Standard Version committee. He's on both committees, Patrick Miller of Princeton. And we razz him. How could you make such ugly constructions!

Of course, we were assigned to stay as close as possible to the RSV to change only when the change was necessary for inclusiveness. We were not supposed to paraphrase the scriptures. We were supposed to stay as close as we could to the RSV because the RSV is recognized as the most scholarly of the translations. But my golly, do they ever need stylists over there! Just awful.

The assignment and the awkwardness

Of course I was very nettled by the criticisms about the awkwardness, because sometimes it wasn't us at all. And I was complaining and yelling and wanting to change the constructions and was told repeatedly, we can't do that.

Our mandate was to stay with the RSV. Except we got a little looser about that by the Revised Edition. Because those of us who were in English showed them the reviews said, "Look, you are not the ones,

your reputations are on the line as far as the Greek and Hebrew translation is concerned, but our reputations are on the line as far as style is concerned, and we are embarrassed."

So we did get a little more loose. And we made a decision. Our decision was that although beauty in language is a very important quality, compared to human injustice and human pain, we would sacrifice the beauty. And we just did it. And there were things that make my flesh crawl.

For sheer beauty, I love the King James and I would read it to a dying person, certainly one who loved the King James. But when it comes to a drawdown between beauty and justice, I'll take justice because that's beautiful too.

Lord to Sovereign and the implications

I love the word, *Lord*. All my life I've loved the word Lord. I have loved to call Jesus *Lord*. We really worked by consensus, but I would've voted on the committee for *Lord*. At least, before the 1978 EWC conference, the one when that controversy erupted on the floor. Just I didn't expect it, but some of the women in EWC had a tremendous objection to *Lord* on the basis of class, not so much on the basis of sex.

See, I could rationalize *Lord*, because I knew that they called Queen Elizabeth "my Lord." I could manage to excuse *Lord* as in not quite sex specific, but the class thing spoke to me. A woman at the conference said, I don't even know who she was, but she said at EWC four years ago, "Hey, what do people know about Lords in our society? Landlords. And they're usually very unjust and very cruel and very exploitative, and it isn't a good image."

However, I could argue back that the word *kairos* was intended to say that all the unjust Lords are going to heal under to this Lord. You see? So, in that sense, even the negative image of landlord would be effective.

It's like that book by Diane Tennis, *Is God the Only Reliable Father?* For some people, the father image of God is extremely valuable because they had unreliable or absent or cruel fathers. But for other people with the same kind of father, the father image for God is disgusting. They cannot stand it. So, it all depends on the inner weather, doesn't it?

I think the intention in the New Testament, certainly from the discussions I heard from Burton Throckmorton and others, the Greek scholars, the intention of *kairos* was distinctly to say, here is the sovereign Lord. This is the one Lord that makes all other masters and lords heel under. And that may sound very oppressive. We don't like hierarchy as feminists, but if you are under the heel of a very oppressive tyrant, you'd be happy to hear that that tyrant has somebody who's going to call him to accountability after a while.

Sovereign was the word we felt was a good substitute. We wish we could have found a one syllable substitute. Obviously that would've been ideal. But there isn't any, in the English language. So we went with *Sovereign* feeling that it had important political implications.

One of our problems in the world today is that we have sovereign nations, sovereign states all over the world, toe-to-toe, piling up nuclear armaments, ready to destroy each other on the basis of nationalism. Which looks so darn silly to me. Really silly. Because I'm impressed with the fact that there's just one Sovereign. The Sovereign who wipes out all other sovereignties before whom all other sovereignties don't make any difference. And I grieve that we're so close to destruction. Because we have put so much stake in nationalities when we're really all one family and one world.

We went with *Sovereign* it because we liked the political implications of it. And it is a word that communicates in the modern world. See, what you're getting after is the hierarchical connotations of it. Remember that our mandate is only to make scripture sound, to make it *read* inclusively, so that it's not excluding any human being. We are not in the business of trying to change the scripture itself.

The intention of scripture is inclusive

In fact, we wanted very desperately not to change it. Every one of us on that committee, six men, six women, are profoundly convinced that the intention of scripture was inclusive. We wouldn't necessarily go to the wall for any individual writer. We understood that all the individual writers were writing out of their own context. But we all felt that the intention of the book overall, as it has come down to us, was inclusive. We would go to the wall for that concept. We felt we were just trying to make an instrument of worship which would not clobber people.

The stuff is already all out of context. It's not like it's a study Bible. If you're studying the Bible, you ought to read the text exactly the way it is with all the patriarchy in it, all the sexism, and all the rest in it. And I really appreciated Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's explanation of the way the text functions because that's exactly our understanding. That originally the text was not intended to be sexist. It was not intended to be racist. But the fact is that it functions that way now. And we feel that for a worship instrument in which the scriptures are already out of context, that there's no earthly reason to stand there and read something that clobbers people.

The 1990 RSV [New Revised Standard Version or NRSV] will change a small percentage of that. Take the word *anthropos* for instance. In my opinion, since that word means human being, there's absolutely no excuse to say man anymore. Not in this day and age, not now that we know that for centuries, I was going to say decades, but for centuries that word has been interpreted at the whim of the interpreter.

If it's convenient to say *anthropos* means human race, it means human race. If it means taking away a woman's property and giving it to a man, it means man, male. If it means keeping women out of ordination as in the Christian Reformed Book of Order, then the word means male. Now, clearly feminists can't stand for that anymore. You can't have a word that's a counter-word like that, that can

shift back and forth between meaning human race and male. Because women are going to get the dirty end of the stick every time.

Now when you've got a word like *anthropos*, that means human being, then as far as I'm concerned, anything coming out in 1990 ought to say human being or humanity or person, every time. But it's only going to be that way maybe 10% of the time. That is one heck of a slow turtle. Isn't it? Crawling along.

Look at some of the criticisms that they have leveled at *An Inclusive Language Lectionary* and you would see the spirit of the thing. There's no great solidarity with the oppressed people. I can tell you that right now. I think part of it is that they don't hear enough from the feminists. The chair of the NSRV committee is Bruce Metzger. Write to him. Write to Dr. Bruce Metzger, and tell him that there are people out here who are waiting. We're not asking that these scholars tamper with the text. We're asking that they be truthful.

While working on *An Inclusive Language Lectionary*, we were amazed at how many times our translation is simply more accurate. And it's certainly easier to understand.

Many times, with a pericope, when people get up to read, they'll start out, "And he said to him." Well, that's not only offensive from the standpoint of the exclusion of women or just knocking women over the head with masculinism, but that's also offensive from the standpoint of *you don't know who the heck is talking to whom*. You see?

So in that case, we would've said, "And Jesus said to Peter." And that makes it a lot clearer as well as a lot less offensively androcentric. When you're willing to trivialize and make jokes, yuk-yuk-yuk, har-har-har, about inclusive language, you are not committed. You are simply not concerned with the pain of the oppressed people.

I've been terribly offended by some of the criticisms. But we did take, very seriously, the criticisms that took our work seriously.

[At this time, Virginia answers a question from the floor about whether Dr. Metzger would pass along any letters he received to the NRSV committee and then returns to the presentation.]

I have a feeling that all of you are already committed to inclusive language, so I don't know that we need to read other textual examples from *An Inclusive Language Lectionary*. But let me just say this. I was going to have somebody read Isaiah 53 for you, verses 3 through 12, and I was going to have you count the number of times that you get the implication that "God's righteous servant" has to be a male righteous servant.

And in those few verses in the King James Version, there are 50 instances containing the implication that God's righteous servant is male. In the RSV, 48 times. In the New International Version, 46 times. "The servant who will do justice, bring about righteousness and suffer. Yes, and suffer." Which seems so

terrible when you consider how much suffering women have done in the cause of righteousness, for centuries.

Who is Christ's body?

I remember once I was sitting at the Presbyterian celebration for women in ministry in Albany, or maybe it was Schenectady, a couple of years back. And I got there late. They were having communion. They were passing from one to the other, rather than people going up front. And the woman sitting next to me, I didn't know who she was, but she apparently knew who I was.

When she handed me the bread, she said, "Virginia, you are Christ's body."

Blew me away! It stunned me. I just hadn't quite ever thought of it that way. Certainly not in that context. But I thought about it theologically afterwards, and of course she was right. And it's tremendously empowering to think of yourself that way, as Christ's body.

But one reason it hadn't occurred to me was that I have always referred Christ as "he." Jesus Christ. Jesus was a human male. Christ always functioned as more or less his last name in my church. Naturally the appropriate pronoun would be "he."

But by the time I got on the *Lectionary* committee, I'd already progressed beyond that point. I read *In Memory of Her*, by Schüssler Fiorenza, and her final passage was the first time I had seen the Christ referred to as "she" in print. And the tears just hit my glasses. Sometimes I'm crying before I know it, and this time it was with relief and joy.

I think it's extremely important that we not always refer to the Christ as "he." The man Jesus? Yes. Christ? No.

De-sexing the Bible?

The *Lectionary* committee has been accused of de-sexing. You saw that all over the press. That we "de-sexed the Bible." Since when is it de-sexing something to put women into it? Now that's a strange concept. And we were accused of denying that Jesus was a human male. But we haven't done that at all. We use "he" concerning Jesus quite often. Not as often as "he" is used in the King James, or the RSV, but quite often enough.

We tried to lighten it up as much as we could, but we certainly used it. But when it came to the references to the pre-existent Jesus, such as in Philippians chapter two, "Jesus thought it not a thing to be grasped after to be equal with God," well, you try to do those reflexives without any pronouns!

"But made himself of no reputation and took upon himself the form of a servant." See, this is really desperate. And it was only in our last few meetings that we finally were able to convince each other that

we should go to “Christ's self.” Emptied Christ's self. Because before that we had “emptied self” and it never sat right with me. Emptied self. It's a reflexive.

Son or Child?

The beauty of the son metaphor is of course that son is son, whether son is an infant in your arms, or 50 years old, or 28, like mine. The son remains the son and we're very sorry to lose that.

But your child is also your child. All his or her days. So, we did it. We knew we had to do something with the son metaphors. As much as we all love them from the theological perspective because they're just gorgeous.

Of course, in that culture, only the males received inheritances. And so the whole idea is that the son grows up and becomes the father. That's a very important theological idea which I would like to hear more about. That is the adulthood of the believer and the responsibility to do the Godding in the world. To be the father in the world, or mother.

Unfortunately, we have no word in the English language with which to speak non-sex-specifically of somebody who is the offspring of somebody else all the way through their life. Offspring is kind of a cold word. Believe me, we tried them all. Child is the only word.

My mother often tells me I'll always be her *baby* as a matter of fact. Not just her child. This really doesn't agree with my self-concept a heck of a lot, but I always smile with embarrassment and say, "Yes, Mother, I'll always be your baby."

To stick with the son metaphor was of course once again to imply that women do not ‘God,’ or do not become ‘Christed.’ That women do not grow up into the head, into Christ. That's why we couldn't stick with the son metaphor. So, we went with Child. We capitalized it. Sometimes we used only Child or only-begotten Child, wherever that was appropriate. Of course, the argument against our choice was this implies that Jesus was a small child. A child in rompers or something.

We were able to address this in the appendix — the appendix is really a very good instrument, I hope that you're using it. The introduction in the appendix, I think, is a real crash course in inclusive language. And we explain in the appendix that there are many places, particularly in the Christian scriptures, where the address is clearly to men and women. To adult Christians.

For instance, in first John, my “little children,” not just my children. My “little children.” And clearly he was not intending to infantilize the church by saying that, but rather to establish family relationship. So, we felt, on the basis of all of that precedent, that we would go with Child capitalized.

It also had a good political feel for us because we thought that if people looked at children and thought of the Holy one, there might be a little less child abuse. And there is a tremendous amount of child abuse in Christian circles.

I asked my mother, "Did your mother beat you?" Because my mother beat me. I asked her, "Were you beaten in your home? Did your mother or father beat you up?"

"No," she said.

Then I asked her, "Why did you do it to me?"

She replied, "Because the Bible says spare the rod and spoil the child."

I asked, "Were you spoiled?"

"Well, no," she confirmed.

I said, "So how come you didn't pass on to me that grace that was given to you?"

Well, she didn't know. But she just felt at the time that she didn't want me to be ruined.

There's a tremendous amount of child abuse in Christian circles because of that kind of exegesis. And of course, as you know, we have the Moral Majority arguing that the real problem with family is that we need more protection for the rights of fathers. More protection for the rights of fathers! We don't need children's rights, we need parents' rights, and in particular father's rights.

Sure, a little more patriarchy will solve the problem.

This is one of the reasons why the committee felt that it was a very important thing, to use the word Child. We thought that probably part of the reaction against speaking of Jesus as the only Child of God was coming from an unconscious feeling surrounding all the child pornography and so on. We felt that this image of Jesus as God's Child will be helpful.

How imagery interacts with behavior

Imagery interacts with behavior on such an unconscious level. My own feeling about *An Inclusive Language Lectionary* is that it will take 20 years to be accepted in the liberal churches. The ones who claim to be already on the side of inclusive language. It will take 20 years to get this sort of thing established in the liberal churches, let alone the conservative churches.

Inclusive language is not in widespread enough use. We do however have historical and biblical examples, as I write about in *The Divine Feminine: Biblical Imagery of God as Female*. Toward the end of that, I discussed Dame Julian of Norwich, and her text, *Showings*. Because we have several versions of that text — earlier versions, later versions.

From the time Julian began to use imagery of God as woman, there was a falling away of the self-deprecation that existed in her before she began to use it. You can see it! In this writing from the 14th

century, some empowerment happening, some self-empowerment occurring because she began to use female imagery!

I can certainly tell you something about my own life. I began to come alive about this issue because I started off being adept at seeing myself as a "son" of God.

I always had to do these mental handsprings. I was Plymouth Brethren for heaven's sake. I sat there, under my hat, every Sunday and heard all about the "sons of God." I knew what my hat meant. My hat meant I was subordinate to all men, including my own son. I would be subordinate to him. And as I grew, I just did the handsprings. It meant denying my own gender, my own body. It meant disembodiment myself and seeing myself as God's "son" spiritually, which is exactly the self-abstraction women have had to do all along.

But I spoke at a Church of the Brethren luncheon one time. I was talking about imagery, and I said I would be willing to call myself the "son of God" if all the men there would be willing to call themselves the "bride of Christ." Which is just as much an image in the Christian scriptures, even though we don't hear a heck of a lot about it. It's an abstraction in which the church is referred to as "she" and is called the "bride of Christ."

But I have never met a man, looked a man right in the eye who would say, "I am the bride of Christ." Whereas I'm supposed to sing hymns all the time that say I'm the "son" or the "brother." Well, when I said that I was willing to be the "son of God" if they were willing to be the "bride of Christ," oh boy, some women got me afterwards. They put me up against the wall quite literally, tears in their angry eyes, and they said, "Don't ever do that to us again."

Now of course, *they are a church called the Church of the Brethren!* And I've seen letters in their publications in which people wrote in saying, "The Brethren are always very kind to their wives. How dare you say that the Brethren exclude women?" Well, you see, the letter itself is assuming that all the Brethren are men, isn't it?

And they're lovely people. I'm not putting down that church. I'm telling you that there were some Church of the Brethren women who tried to make me to cut it out, although I had had myself all geared up.

I've met many women since I've been involved in the inclusive language issue who have been very angry with me and have said, "It doesn't bother *me* to call God 'he.'" And I say, "Well, it may not bother you, but it bothers me. As long as it doesn't matter to you, and it does matter to me, will you please call God 'she'?"

Anyhow, it is all for the sake of the pain of the *others*. That's what Christianity is about, isn't it? The pain of the *other* people.

The words “she” and “mother”

I had myself completely inured to the fact that thinking of myself as a “son of God,” and consequently I did not think it was hurting me at all.

But then I began to try to bring the word “she” past my larynx. Now it's one thing to substitute the words “Creator,” “Sustainer,” or “Redeemer” for God. Those words are mostly devoid of gender connotations. But that is not enough.

We had this same discussion among us on *An Inclusive Language Lectionary* committee. The discussion about whether to put *mother* in the text. We put it in square brackets, admittedly, to indicate that we were interpolating, but we put it there so it would be read out loud.

We knew that *mother* was going to be the bone breaker, the bone crusher. See, that is where you take the axe to the root of patriarchy.

We had a committee chair, a Lutheran, and I thought the Lutheran church would accept the *Lectionary*. If they had it would've been a tremendous help. At least there wouldn't have been an official rejection right off the bat, which there was. It came down from the bishop. At our press conference where we released it! And it was because we had used the word “mother” in the text!

Now we knew that was going to happen. And we went back to it several times in the course of our discussions, but we decided that either you do it or you don't.

Which is why I personally am very glad for what we did this morning. [This is a reference to Gracia Grindal's plenary, "God's Image, Woman's Image," presented earlier that day. See paragraph six of Ann Ramsey Moor's [conference recap here](#).] Either we're a feminist organization or we're not. Either we're going after patriarchy or we're not. That's just what Schüssler Fiorenza says. True mutuality is not possible in patriarchy. So, either you're going after the whole ball of wax, all the injustices, as one common front—not dividing off justice for *just us*—but justice for the whole of everybody. Otherwise, you're not really doing anything.

Now it's up to the church

So, we decided we might as well not *waste* the five years we spent working on the *Lectionary*. We needed to just do it. It was going to result in a tremendous rejection of us initially, which is exactly what we got, and all the mockery and all the trivialization, all the jokes. But at least we would have done it.

Now it's up to *the church* whether it will be accepted. If it's not, the church is just going to move into a position of irrelevance in the world because of a few who want to hang in there with idolatry. In my opinion, it's idolatry to worship any single image, including a father image.

Why are the women so passionately addicted to the patriarchy? They have internalized a second-class identity, which may be second class, but by God it's theirs. It's familiar. This is the thing I've tried to get many of the church groups I've interacted with to release.

St. Paul said he was willing to be anything in order to win people over to Christ. He'd be anything to anybody. So how come we're not willing just to simply open our language a little bit to stop forcing people out? Some of the most thoughtful people, some of the most sensitive and caring people, men as well as women, just can't stand to let go of the androcentric language.

The Christ-like servant lifts up those who are weaker, right? That's what Christianity is about, isn't it?

Staying in "our place"

I remember during the civil rights movement; my aunt had a Black woman who worked in her house (my aunt lived in the South). I had a few run-ins with my aunt because of this. I referred to the worker as a *lady*, and I got bawled out. I stuck my hand out to shake her hand and I was told I shouldn't have done that. I said, why? What did she do? I thought the only way you disqualified yourself from being a lady was by doing something unladylike.

A few years later my aunt told me a story that Della, the worker, came in very upset and angry and said that her daughter was "[pig tracks](#)." Well, what had her daughter done? Her daughter had been invited by the white family she was waiting on, to sit down at the table with them, and she had done so. Della, her mother, was furious. Because she, as a "good Black mother," had taught her daughter her place and now her daughter was not staying in her place.

Now see, I think that a lot of the brouhaha from women about inclusive language is precisely that. We have been trained to stay in our place. It is a safe place. We'll be taken care of if we stay in our place. Which is not true, but people have been conned into believing it. So, it is extremely frightening when people like me are coming along and asking people to take a leap of faith.

That's how it feels. Scary.

I've had people say to me, "But if I do what you're saying, what will happen to me?" I say, "I don't know what will happen to you. You are walking into the future and there isn't a map and no one will give you any guarantees either."

No guarantees.

It's like the Bible story about the lepers [2 Kings 7:3]. A group of people with leprosy were starving, as were the inhabitants of a nearby city. There was an enemy camp nearby. The starving people said to each other, "Well, if we stay here, we die. But if we go down into the camp and surrender, maybe we die and maybe we live." So, they went into the enemy camp. It turned out that the camp was deserted and full of food, and so their gamble worked.

In a sense it's very frightening. I've been frightened many times. I'm frightened about what I have to get up and say Thursday [in her plenary address to the conference attendees]. My knees will be weak. But I have to say what was given to me. I prayed and I asked for a message and I got it. I am not particularly happy about it. I'm frequently *not happy* about what I have to say.

Until I talked to Schüssler Fiorenza, I had no idea that anybody was thinking in terms of a whole Bible-inclusive paraphrase. It would have to be called something like "a feminist paraphrase" in order to preserve the integrity of the Greek and Hebrew in the eyes of the scholars. But she was talking about people working on something like that.

Looking into the *intention* of the text

The attitude of our *Lectionary* committee has been that when people are studying the Bible, they ought to study it in all of its particularity. Just the way it is. And study the historical backgrounds and so forth and make the necessary kinds of cultural adjustments. That is, to see the way the text functioned originally.

For instance, when Jesus told us to pray to God as "our father," certainly the intention was not to say God is a man. From all we know about the culture and about Jesus, the intention was to say, look, those in the power position *can* be nurturing and unconditionally loving.

Because in the story, in the parable of the prodigal son, the things the father says in that parable are really the things we would expect the wife to say in our culture! It's the wife who would say, "Hey, if Harry comes back, let's take him back. Let's not rub his nose in what a dumb thing he's done."

So, Jesus tells this story, and it's really very counter-cultural for the time! But what happens is that the image used, father, hardens into an idol. The story was not originally sexist. Certainly the intent was not sexist. But when it's used all by itself, then Mary Daly is right, that if God is a male, then the male is God. She's darn right about that.

Balancing metaphors

That's why we must introduce balancing metaphors. My feeling is that in liturgy there should be a female lead-in if you're going to say the Lord's prayer. I don't like "Our *parent* who is in heaven." That's too abstract. That's a step one phrase. You never say, "Oh, my parent." You say, "my father" or "my mother."

But if you had a lead-in, the liturgy right before you went into the Lord's prayer, then "our Father" could function inclusively.

"Well, let us pray together. Let us pray to our holy mother who is in heaven, the prayer that Jesus taught us to pray."

Then we can say “our father,” because we balanced it in the liturgy.

Gender and God

It has been said that [this gender or that gender] is not the final truth about God.

Remember, I was telling you about my own progress. As I began to try to say “she” for God, and tried to start using parental metaphors of mother, not just father, it was hard for me. I had a feeling like I was desecrating something. I had a dirty feeling about myself.

That made me think to myself, “Hey Virginia, what does that say about your attitude toward your own femaleness and towards your sisters?”

I’ve had letters from people, some woman who read my book, *The Divine Feminine*.

Incidentally, that is not my title. It was given by the publisher without so much as consulting me! That’s patriarchy in action. I would never use that title. That’s nonsense. *The Divine Feminine*. I don’t believe in such a thing. It sounds like I believe in some kind of Jungian, eternal feminine and eternal masculine. I don’t believe that. It comes from socialization, that sort of thing. I was furious, but the book was already in production.

[A question is raised from the floor, “What was your title?”]

Biblical Imagery of God as Female. That’s all. Just the truth. That became the subtitle.

Anyway, some woman wrote me and said, “How can you say this is a thing, that God could possibly be female? Don’t you know that God is holy?” She signed her letter with a female name. And of course, I wrote her immediately and said, “My dear sister, do you realize what you have said about you and me and all the other women in the world?”

I am convinced that this sort of imagery has contributed to domestic violence, to wife abuse. And that our failure to associate children with the holy children in the image of God has contributed to child abuse.

Idolatry: a “graven image”

[Answering a question from the floor.]

Well, some people have even suggested that the monotheism, the masculine, the androcentric monotheism of the Hebrews developed in the context of goddess worship and functioned as a kind of balance to that. Much of the goddess worship was quite cruel. But you have, in that monotheism, the continual argument that there must be no graven image.

I find this very amusing. Take Calvin, for instance. Calvin warns at one point there must never be an image made of "him."

Things like that just have me rolling.

Because Calvin (he is a wonderful Christian humanist) failed to notice that the pronoun, "he," makes a graven image already. And in the very passage in which he's arguing that we ought not get any one single image going, he is helping to support one single image.

Very interesting.

But we couldn't really expect Calvin to have seen that in the 16th century.

I do think we have to allow history to be itself. I have my history and so do you. And there were times when I laughed at things I wouldn't laugh at now, and so on. So, for instance, I'm not going to knock biblical authors or Calvin.

People ask me, how can you be a Milton scholar? "He for God only, she for God in him." Which is one line from *Paradise Lost*. Well, I can study Milton because I can understand history. He was fine, for his time. Far more feminist than most people of his age. It was a very repressive time, right? The 17th century.

Ephesians 5

Originally when the *Common Text Lectionary* was done, the choices were made by Roman Catholic and Protestant scholars in conjunction with each other. Ephesians 5 was in it.

Our initial response was, we just couldn't do it. Because there was no way people were going to hear it as inclusive. As you know, I read that chapter in an egalitarian fashion. And other Christian feminists do. Katharine Bushnell does, and so on.

But when you just stand up and read it, boy, it doesn't come down sounding very egalitarian. So at first we backed off entirely, but this last time we came back to it and we did it. And I think we did it in such a way that it will sound more like what I think the intention was.

The word "Lord" comes back

The three volumes are out and at our last meeting we went over cycle A and cycle B, to bring them in line with our final decisions. And so, when A comes out, again, the changes are not extensive. If you already have cycles A and B, you could go with them unless there's something that really seems out at the elbows to you.

At the last, in cycle C, we put Lord back in. We put it back in brackets as a possibility. That was one of our many little squiggles to show that you can read it that way if you wish. Don't read both "Sovereign" and "Lord" but read one or the other of them. And "Lord" is back in cycle C and will be added back into cycles A and B as well.

I was not happy with that. But so many churches seem unable to do without the "Lord" word, that we put it back in there as a choice.

I was a fence sitter for a long time, but finally I decided I had to give it up. What I do in public, I feel I must do also in private. And I suffer mainly in my private prayer life. "Lord" just keeps cropping right up. I go out every morning. I do an inspection tour in my garden. I've only gardened for a few years and I have the passion of the new convert. So every morning I'm out there to see it. I just would think, "Lord, thank you," when a new flower comes. I'm just praising all over the place. "My, you've done well this morning. Look at these lilies. Isn't this lovely?"

And "Lord" just keeps coming right out of my unconscious mind. So partly I'm mad at having to keep correcting myself, and I got mad at having to put it back in the *Lectionary*.

It's like [English language spelling reform](#). We can't reform English language spelling! It's ridiculous. It is so out of date. But no generation is willing to go through changing the spelling.

And then there's "darkness"

So if you think in terms of human development, we're all female first. Then we differentiate. Just as everything was darkness first and then differentiated into light and darkness.

Unfortunately, our Christian imagery has split-off darkness. And as a consequence, a lot of us try to deny our weakness, our fear, our rage, our pain, and grief because those are the things that are called "dark." We have caused ourselves fits, I think, and a lot of grief by failing to remember that first it was dark, and out of the darkness was differentiated light and darkness, and they were set by God into an alternating sequence.

I feel a lot better about my life when I can look at it and say, oh, that's okay. Today I'm down. Tomorrow maybe I'll be better. It's all right. And in my relationships, no, they don't have to be a-okay every minute. There can be an ebb and a flow somewhat. "No, that's okay. That's all right. I don't have to be perfect, I just have to be whole."

Addressing anti-Semitism

Incidentally, I would like to explain to you the other ways in which the *Lectionary* is inclusive, because some aspects of its inclusivity haven't received as much attention.

We have tried to do something about the anti-Semitism by not saying “Jews” when really, after all, Jesus and most of the disciples were Jews. So, when it says they were afraid of the “Jews,” they're not afraid of all the Jews because some of them are sitting there hiding together.

We tried to be more accurate. But we didn't say “synagogue authorities,” because everybody knows who goes to synagogues. Instead, we say “religious authorities,” so that the church is free to hear that it is its own authorities the text is speaking against.

We heard that story of the bent-over woman, and we saw the whole thing play out again in our [EWC] business meeting. Fear blocks caring about human pain.

As far as I'm concerned, a feminist construction of things puts human pain in front of everything else, and justice for all human beings in front of everything else. That's why we took the liberty even where the text says “Jews,” to substitute “religious authorities” where it's clear the text does not mean all Jews.

There are places where the text really does mean all the Jews, but they're usually not the pejorative places. We have made that distinction very carefully, and we hope that this will help to lessen some of the anti-Semitism which has been very rife in Christianity.

The distinction between a lectionary and a study Bible

And this brings us back to the distinction between the *Lectionary* and a study Bible.

We feel that that kind of thing, understanding what passages refer to the Jewish people as a whole and what passages implicate religious authorities, has to be taken up in the serious study of the Bible. But, when you're reading from the pulpit, which is what you do with a lectionary, what you're concerned with is whether you're affirming human beings and creating an atmosphere of worship which does not exclude, or put down, or encourage us to be cruel to certain people.

We hope people engage in serious Bible studies, but they wouldn't use a *Lectionary* for that. They'd use a complete biblical text.

We tried to make that point very clear to the press. But, of course, that night on TV, all over the place, the press kept calling it a *new Bible*. You would've never known we spent one and a half hours explaining to the press the difference between a lectionary and a Bible.

If you've had any brushes with the press, you know that you tend to get from them is whatever's going to catch the public eye. That's what is going to come through on television, and that's exactly what happened. So, *new Bible*.

We pled with them not to call the *Lectionary* a Bible. It is a lectionary. Even though, I think, there's three-quarters of the New Testament and very large segments of the Old Testament in it.

So, you can, I think, have a set of cycles A, B and C for reading purposes, if you're really burdened by the idolatrous connotations and the androcentrism in the Bible itself. In that way the *Lectionary* might be helpful for devotional reading. It is tough to try to read devotionally if you are just going to wind up so angry that you just feel you're burning out. And so I think it's been helpful for many people along those lines.

And then there's "darkness"

Another thing we did was to take out all metaphors of darkness as evil or ignorance. There are many, many metaphors of darkness as either evil or ignorant or the opposite of whatever God is.

The presentation that God is light and God is not darkness, at all, functions fine in John's context, but comes across as pretty racist in the 20th century. In John it's the absence of light, not blackness. That's what we really knocked ourselves out to do. We had several Black members of the committee.

Interestingly enough, some of the white committee members were more sensitive to this at the beginning than were some of the Black members.

However, I think you may have noticed that even at our EWC conference Black people frequently use this imagery. I was astonished the other day in the press to hear Jesse Jackson talking about evil as blackness. I thought, oh my, somebody needs to get to you about the nature of the unconscious mind and what you're feeding people.

Don't say blackness when you mean evil when your skin is black, for heaven's sake, or when your skin is white or any other color. Because it's encouraging bad habits.

The literal unconscious mind

Let me give you an illustration of how literal the unconscious mind is, out of my own life experience.

My brother is a prize-winning artist, two years older than I and he had much power over me, by virtue of him being an older boy in a patriarchal household.

When I was a child, he looked at a drawing I had done and with a curl of his lip he said, "Oh, Virginia, stick to words." Because he thought my drawing was so bad.

And it was only 10 years ago that I realized that not only had I "stuck to words" in the sense that he meant it, but my mind had taken it so literally that I had been afraid, almost phobic, about interior decorating, about mathematics, about nonverbal reasoning.

"Stick to words."

I don't think my brother meant to cripple me in that way, or that he was not my biggest fan. But after coming to that realization, I've been able to become a very good interior decorator, as a matter of fact, and a good gardener. But I couldn't garden until I got over what he had said, "Oh Virginia, stick to words." For years, the only place I really felt safe was with words. Darn near 40 years, I was under the control of the literal way my unconscious had taken his words.

So, I am a profound believer in the idea that whatever you send, whatever imagery you send down to your unconscious, is going to be taken with stark literalness.

Nobody who ever said "he" got a female image.

When I finally got the "she" concerning God past my larynx and began to be able to say it, I began to feel more and more and more power.

There's only one thing that has empowered me more than that, and that was when I accepted that I have a shadow self, a mean streak; that I am not Christ-like in that antiseptically, good, always sweet and always happy way that I was brought up to think I was supposed to be.

When I found out I was a mean motor scooter (I heard a feminist singing about being a mean motor scooter one time and I wanted to stand up and dance in the aisles) I got passion, I was just filled with this energy. Ever since then I have been working on accepting my so-called dark traits. It has not made me meaner. It has in fact made me nicer. Because the meanest people I know are the people who don't know they're mean. You can't even deal with them. You say to them, "Why did you make that snide remark?" And they say, "What snide remark? It was only a joke. What's the matter with you?"

My argument is that the unconscious mind being as literal as it is, our language has enormous power to throttle us or to send us into the blue. We can call God Father. We're not asking to get rid of the image of God as Father. I think that's been a mistake when some people have tried that. Instead, just move it over and balance it off. If you're using parental images, balance the father images off with mother images and many other images, both male and female images.

God is baker woman and all the nature images. I think we need nature images of God lifted up very much because we've been raping our environment. We've got to stop it. We're human chauvinists acting like the resource is going to last forever. We need to think of the water and the wind the way Jesus thought of them as also manifestations of holiness. The rock.

I don't think we have to become animists to do that. We just have to use a wider variety of images. They're all in Scripture, but we do need to lift them up. We can begin to use them on a much more intentional level, much more frequent level.

Person-first language

The other thing we did in the *Lectionary* was pay attention to what the Association for the Handicapped have asked. You may have noticed when I said something off-guard earlier, something about “lepers,” I immediately backtracked and said “people with leprosy.” We have been asked not to use language which makes it sound as if a person *is* his or her limitation or challenge.

On the other hand, I think we've gotten pussy-footy to some degree.

And I've talked to some handicapped persons who want you to say handicapped person because they want you to know they have overcome something, by George, and it's been tough. So they don't want you to pussyfoot around it too much. On the other hand, they don't want to be associated only with their physical limitations. So you don't say cripple, but “a person with ...” is usually the preferred way.

So we have certainly done that throughout the *Lectionary*, and there have been times when that's made things sound awkward. Now, it fell to me to do the story in John of the man born blind, and I checked it out, it's *anthropos*. I went with “the one born blind” so the women could hear themselves in that story.

But it got tough in there with some of those pronouns, like with “this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” There ended up being places where it's less smooth than I would like it to be.

But all in all, I think it was a good trade-off.

Of course it has given some people fits. But it seems fine to me to say “a human being who was born blind” when there was no name. If there had been a name, then we would've stuck with it. Why not allow women to hear themselves in that story? It was the only place, as it turned out, that we had it wide open like that, because in that one we could do it.

Alternate readings were added

We have also put in some stories as alternate readings, that had not been chosen by the *Common Text Lectionary* committee. You know that a lectionary is usually just a list of texts. A lectionary usually doesn't have the whole of the text written out. You're supposed to look the passage up in the Bible. And *An Inclusive Language Lectionary*, of course, has everything printed.

We put it in some alternate passages, sometimes even in the first slot, in the hope that that people would pick the woman's story rather than the other, better known, male story.

There are places where the common text had kind of skipped parts with female images of God. That happens sometimes. You'll have the chosen pericope, like the story of the shepherd seeking the sheep and the prodigal son coming home, but the part about the woman seeking her lost coin, which is the female image of God put right in between those other images, will get left out.

Of course, the shepherd image is either sex, judging from Rachel in Genesis. Rachel is a shepherd, and nobody seems upset about that.

We've really been fooled by the pictures in our Bibles. All the shepherds had beards. But when I read about Rachel, I put that in my mind for a future reference. She's a shepherd, so my pictures were wrong. It's like *The Color Purple* says, "Them white folks really did us." The white males did us in.

Yes, it was a tremendous struggle. Again. Everything has been.

The Bible is not a magic book

I grappled with the idea of God-breathed scripture by confronting the difference between magic and the way God actually seems to work in the world.

God could have given us a magic book, and I often say this to conservative audiences. I often say it to audiences, period.

God could have given us a magic book.

Anybody who can make babies come out of women complete with fingers and toes, little toenails, little fingernails could have made a magic book.

We could have been given a book that when you pick it up, it's in your own language. Think of the convenience of that. A book always in your own language and at your own grade level. Eighth grade for most Americans, eighth grade. A book in which you understand all the images because it's just tailor-made for you. That would be a magic book.

But that's not what we have.

We have a book written over the course of 13 centuries by a variety of people in different languages with their own understanding of words, with their own history, with their own struggles.

That's what helped me, you see, to realize that the witness was given to us through human agency.

I look at Genesis and I see God saying to Adam and Eve, "Hey, you take over this world now. You take charge."

The way, in other words, that I was taught about Scripture was really a kind of narcissism, scriptural narcissism. This is 100% divine and involved no human agency.

That is obviously, by definition, not how it worked.

The committee had good intentions. It was not easy. People came from all over the country.

It's not easy when you've taught all week to meet and work like crazy for 10 or 12 hours a day all weekend, and then go back to teach again on Monday.

But we did it and we did it without pay.

We did it out of love for our task, and love for the Gospel. And I must say that as an ex-fundamentalist it was a great thing for me. I was always told liberals didn't care about the Bible, and a lot of these people working on this project with me would be classified as liberal.

I just loved it. I loved the run-arounds. I loved the Hebrew scholars going at each other about what this or that could mean. Asking, "Can we say that? Is that faithful to the text?" The Greek scholars asking, "Can we possibly? Nope. Paul couldn't possibly mean that." And going around and around. Whatever time it took, we took. Boy, we stayed there until we got it as accurate as possible, except that to the modern ear, we wanted to make it inclusive.

I think in many cases we were got closer to the real meanings, as in the case of *adelphoi*, "brothers" is a mistranslation. *Adelphoi* means people from the same womb. That's girls and boys, both. Men and women, both. Brothers and sisters is far more accurate. Relatives would be okay, but relatives is kind of a cold-sounding word.

I also love the translation "the human one" instead of "the Son of Man." We did a lot of research about the meaning, and I think a lot of the brouhaha about that translation has been because people don't want to see the human race as full of dignity.

About those pesky pronouns

What I see is that we'll get used to operating without pronouns.

All this linguistic change!

Have you ever tried using a new word? The first few times you use a word that's completely alien to your vocabulary, you feel as if everyone is looking at you. They're not looking, they don't know it's a new word to you, but you feel awkward as all get out.

I think that's what's happening.

I feel that I can use "God" as a kind of job description. I can say "she" or some image to indicate God, but I must witness to the fact that I'm using it inclusively. I can't just use it without circling back real fast to make sure that I have clarified the fact that I'm using this as inclusive of female or not.

One must make one's witness. And not hide behind some kind of common gender. Because it's not common gender unless you make it common gender. May I recommend to you a book also put out by the National Council of Churches, edited by Presbyterian Barbara A. Withers who was on the committee. It's called *Language and the Church*, and it has a series of study guides. It's set up so that you could run maybe 10 sessions of an adult class on the inclusive language issue.

You can use *Language and the Church* with the *Lectionary*, or you can do it with other means as well. Need not be, in other words, hand in glove with the *Lectionary*. But the book provides a structure, so you don't have to reinvent the wheel for people to iterate. Just let it all hang out. Let people explore what the heck they're afraid of. Give people an opportunity to ventilate their fears.

At any rate, I really do recommend *Language and the Church*. It has some good readings and if you just got one copy, you could Xerox some of it to use as handouts for people.

I really think inclusive language is one of those issues that people say is trivial, but it isn't trivial. It really gets to the gut. I've had people tell me how trivial it is but while they are speaking their veins are sticking out with distress! It's like the gay issue. When you're discussing it you have to let people ventilate everything they're afraid of.

Language does not change by creating a new word. What happens in our language is what always happens in language. There's a word that is needed, and it's used in the streets. First, it's considered wrong, and it's labeled as wrong in the dictionaries, if it gets into the dictionary at all. But eventually enough people use it. It's the people who make the language. And eventually the dictionary writers put it into the dictionary, even though it might still have dialectal markings on it.

Take the word "ain't." If enough educated people used "ain't" in enough educated circles, after a while it would lose its dialectal (or slang) label.

The title "Ms." just made it into the New York Times. I'm happy to tell you that because it means "Ms." is now a recognized part of the English language.

Virginia predicts they, them, theirs — in 1982

What is going to happen with pronouns is the adoption of the word that Shakespeare sometimes used as a singular pronoun, "their." "Will everybody please open *their* book to page so-and-so." It's coming in.

We already use it occasionally when there isn't another word. We actually used it occasionally in the *Lectionary* as a pronoun. Eventually that usage is going to be considered correct. Take that as a prophecy from an old English teacher. Eventually it will be correct.

Already it's accepted by the National Council of Teachers of English in some circumstances. It's much better than saying "he" when you really mean all the students. All students are not men.

Now "you" is either way. "You" will function as either singular or plural.

Eventually "they" is going to function, correctly, as either singular or plural. So if you've done it, don't correct yourself. Just go right ahead.

“He and she” is impossible. Now, being an English teacher, I’ll use “his or her” book rather than exclude the female. That’s for sure. But eventually I’m going to have up my courage to say “their” book.

But being an English teacher, of course, I always think people are going to think I don’t know any better. So what I do now is I change it into the plural. I just shift everything into the plural so that I can avoid the whole problem.

But “they” will replace he and she. Yeah. When you’re being indiscriminate, when you’re talking about persons, and you would have to use he or she, you’ll just go to “they.”

Some fellow in the 17th century invented the idea that “he” is generic and includes the female. And then Parliament passed a law codifying it in the 18th century. We don’t have to keep on obeying that claptrap. *These are just rules that were made up.*

We’re making up different rules now. That’s right.

Give it 10 years and they’re going to just give up.

My freshman English students are so happy with me, they’ve been saying it whole lives and now they can put it in their English papers. They are so happy.