

Creative Differences in the Image of God

by Cindy Bourgeois

One time in the lunch room at seminary I was talking with a classmate about God and the fact that I am an out and proud Christian trans woman. At one point I said, “I just know that God created me this way.” We are close enough that they felt comfortable sharing their real thoughts with me, so they said, “But I just have trouble believing that God made a mistake.” My immediate response was, “Well, why do you think God made a mistake?” Another time I was speaking in a class about my lived experience as a trans woman and I said that I was glad that God created me trans. Someone objected, unable to understand how I could be glad that I was trans, because of all the discrimination and oppression and hatred that I face. They thought I must be angry with God or have a problem with God because I was created trans.

I don't have a problem with God. God is not the problem. God is never the problem. And when God created me, there was no mistake. God was creating another creature in God's image. We are all created in God's image:

Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:26-27 NRSV)

At the time that this passage was written it was often thought that the local king was the image of God. The king was God's representative here on earth. But Genesis 1 changes all that. When the priestly author writes that “God created humankind in his image...male and female he created them,” he is saying that all of humankind is created in God's image. All of humankind means everybody. God's representative is no longer a king who rules through power and empire. Instead every individual is now a representative of God, created in the image of God.¹ This includes trans folk. To say otherwise is to deny our personhood, to take away our very humanity.

Further, if everybody is made in the image of God then so is *every body*: That means male and female and every body in between. It is interesting that if we take the most literal interpretation of Genesis 1:26–27, that both male and female are created in God's image then God must really be intersexed. God is not just woman or not just man but is actually both male and female. Now, this is taking the text to an extreme. Of course, God is beyond gender. God is beyond humanity. However, the idea that every body is made in the image of God begs the question of why the Christian trans person wants to change their body. If God created them this way then why do they need to modify their bodies?

Before we go further, let's acknowledge that not all people who identify as trans want to modify their bodies. In fact, very few want to modify their bodies. Most are happy just to be able to

¹ Fretheim, Terence E., “The Book of Genesis” in *The New Interpreters Bible Volume X*, ed. Keck, Leander E. et al (Nashville: Augsburg Press, 2002), p. 345.

express their gender in whatever way allows them flourish as human beings.² Their gender expression may or may not fit into cultural norms, but in order for them to be fully human their gender expression must be true to their nature.

However, other trans people need (not want, not desire, but *need*) to alter their bodies through surgery and hormone replacement. Their physical bodies and their brains (which are still part of their bodies) are not in sync. The only reliable treatment is surgery and hormone replacement therapy. This is still not saying that God made a mistake and that human beings are correcting that mistake through science and medicine. God reveals Godself in science and medicine as well. In order to flourish, in order to be fully human, some people must alter their bodies. This is true not only for trans people but for many others created with conditions that will not allow them to flourish. Being created in God's image does not mean that every body is born healthy, and it must not mean a life sentence of misery that can be avoided with informed consent and human intervention.

Finally, being created in the image God does not mean being created an exact replica of God. We are not God. We must come to understand that being created in God's image must be interpreted loosely.³ We should imagine it as being elastic or fluid, indeed much like gender itself. Gender is not easily divided into neat compartments but rather is fluid, even mysterious. We must learn to dwell in the mystery of gender as we learn to dwell in the very mystery of God⁴ even though we will never fully comprehend the "Holy Mystery that is Wholly Love."⁵ As we learn to live with the mystery and ambiguity of God, we can also learn to live with the mystery and ambiguity of the gender of God's children who are made in God's image.

So for those who ask me if God made a mistake in creating me trans, I say, "No! God makes no mistakes." I know that God loves me the way I am. It is not God that I am worried about, it is the world. The reason that people hate me for who I am is not God's fault. It is the result of the brokenness of the world. And for those who ask me if I am angry with God for making me trans, I say, "No! I am created in the image of God. I know that God loves me. Do you?"

Cindy Magdalene Bourgeois is the first known trans person to be ordained in The United Church of Canada. She was settled to Central United Church in Stratford, Ontario, in 2010, having just graduated with a Master of Divinity. In addition to her work with trans issues, Cindy is an adherent of the social gospel and liberation theology, believing that God has a preferential option for the poor and the oppressed. Feeling called to participate in the development of resources to affirm the participation and ministry of trans people in the United Church, Cindy is a member of the Trans/Gender Diversity Working Group at the General Council Office.

² The concept of changing one's body in order to "flourish" came in conversations with Thomas E. Reynolds.

³ Reynolds, Thomas E., *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Vulnerability and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2008), p. 178.

⁴ Smith, Christine M., *Preaching as Weeping, Confession and Resistance: Radical Responses to Radical Evil* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992) p. 104. Smith makes the connection of the mystery of God with the mystery of sexuality. A similar connection can be made to mystery of gender.

⁵ *A Song of Faith: A Statement of Faith of the United Church of Canada/L'Église Unie du Canada*, 2006.