

PACIFIC ASIAN VISION

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GOD WHO NEEDS TWO ARMS

Rev. Dickson Kazuo Yagi, May 13, 2018
Sage Granada Park U. Methodist Church, Alhambra, CA 91711

1 John 4:7-12 God Is Love; Love is God.

Today is Mothers Day. On Mothers Day we are confronted in our churches with a Father God. Why not a Mother God on Mothers Day? Roman Catholics balance out the Father God by adoration of Mother Mary. Perhaps Protestants can say that the Mother God is present in the Holy Spirit. Galatians Chapter 5, verses 22, 23 says, *"The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."* These are mainly feminine qualities. For Protestants, the Mother God is alive within the Holy Spirit.

About four years ago I attended a Conference at Claremont School of Theology, our local Methodist Seminary. Professor Monica Coleman is a brilliant Afro-American lady. She said, "Picture God in your imagination. What is your picture of God like? Of course, European and American artists for centuries have been painting God with blue eyes, blonde hair, white skin and a white beard. What is more natural than God looking like the dominant racial group?

Likewise in the past hundred years, African artists have painted God with black skin. Asian artists have painted God with Golden skin and slanty eyes. If Euro-Americans can have a white God, Africans should have a black God, and Asians should have a Golden God with slanty eyes. We should all have a God who looks like us, whether black, brown, white, or Golden.

Don't take these pictures of God too seriously. In the first place, God is not a human being. We paint God as a human being with arms and legs, because we don't know what God looks like. The New Testament says that God is like the wind, in Old Testament Hebrew, *"Ruach,"* in New Testament Greek, *"Pneuma."* Can anybody paint the wind?

Monica Coleman said whatever else she needs from her picture of God, her God needs two arms. Her God needs two arms because she needs to be hugged. This explains the sermon title this morning—God Who Needs Two Arms. God has to have two arms because we need to be hugged. I like the way Prof. Monica Coleman thinks.

I had a window seat on the passenger jet as it left LAX. I was fascinated to watch the people and the cars and buildings rapidly shrinking as the plane went higher. As we got higher and higher, everything looked smaller and smaller, but the whole scene got bigger—a panoramic view. I could see not only LAX, but all of Los Angeles County, as we flew higher and higher.

It was evening and the lights came on. Hundreds and thousands of lights, each light representing one household and perhaps a family with children. So many, many lights, so many, many families, so many, many children. I could not believe God could love all the people out there. Millions upon millions. God can't remember that many faces, that many names, that many children, each one having their own dreams, their own problems, their own joys and their own tears. I sat there for a while facing for the first time the problem of numbers. There's just too many people out there for God to care for everybody.

But after 5 minutes I got another thought. What if there were a mother in each family—a mother to love every member of that family. A mother to love every child. I have trouble thinking of God being able to love all

those people out there. But if there were a mother in every family, God could love all those millions of people, loving them through the mothers in every family. Of course, there are also very compassionate men. There are men with mothers hearts. But warm hearted love is in the DNA of mothers.

Less than 1% of Japanese in Japan are Christians. Out of a population that is less than 1% Christian, there was an outstanding Christian novelist who wrote about 10 novels that became best sellers. His name is Shusaku Endo. About 2 years ago, a movie called **Silence** made waves in the U.S. The novel was written by Shusaku Endo. In my classes in a Japan university, Shusaku Endo's books are required reading. Endo wrote about 4 historical novels that were biographies of Jesus Christ and the early church. These became best sellers, Buddhists reading historical novels about Jesus. A Buddhist scholar left Japan to become a missionary in Los Angeles. We sat next to each other in the headquarters temple for Shin Buddhism West. That's in Little Tokyo. He asked me what books he could read to learn more about Christianity. I gave him a list of books by Shusaku Endo. Guess what! He had already read all of Endo's books while he was still in Japan. Buddhist scholars in Japan are reading Shusaku Endo's novels about Jesus Christ.

Bob Culpepper, a Baptist theology professor complained. The God of Jesus Christ is a Father God. Why does Shusaku Endo write about the God of Jesus Christ as a Mother God? Endo's explanation as novelist is simple enough. Japanese love their mothers more than their fathers. That's not reason enough for a Bible scholar. But that's reason enough for a novelist. The whole nation is reading Endo's books on Jesus. I asked, "Bob, how many Japanese Buddhists are reading the book you published about Jesus? End of discussion.

There has been much interest and research on the wartime diaries of Japanese kamikaze suicide pilots. My cousin in Japan was a kamikaze suicide pilot. These suicide pilots drop down from the sky to crash their Zero fighter planes into the decks of American battleships. The last word from their mouth is KAACHAN—Mother. The point is that every Japanese knows what the kamikaze pilot is going to say before he says it. They all would have said the same thing—KAACHAN, Mother. Nobody is going to say, TOOCHAN, Father. The Japanese love their mothers more than their fathers.

In March 1960, I arrived in Japan for the very first time. I noticed an unnatural multitude of single women who could not marry and become mothers. They could not marry, because hundreds of thousands of Japanese men had died in the war. Soldiers of a lost cause. We honor all these women also this morning for Mothers Day. One of these women was my good friend, Seno-san.

Growing up in Hawaii, my church said that believing in God was the most important thing. If you believed in God, you were in; if you didn't believe in God you were out. But in my early years in college, I reached the opposite conclusion. It was God's fault that we could not believe. Why is God hiding? Why doesn't God show up, so we can see God? Why doesn't God speak up, so we can hear God? Why doesn't God solve our problems with earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, floods, famine, wars, climate change, and disease? It is God's fault that we don't believe!

But in my senior years after retirement in Los Angeles, I have flipped over once again. The human face, the human spirit, human lives, and human hearts—the human is where the **Invisible becomes Visible**. I see God everywhere, all the time, especially in human beings. God isn't hiding. I saw God in Ellen, my wife, for a lifetime. I see God in my daughter, Miriam. I see God in my son, Nathan. I see God in my grandson, Ethan. I see God in your faces and in your voices this morning.

On Mothers Day, we notice that the feminine spirit, especially the Mothers Heart as the most visible focus of the love of God. The love of God is in the DNA of mothers. The masculine and the feminine in varying combinations are alive in all human beings, both male and female. Let us celebrate the heart of mothers by bringing the love of God to all those around us. Happy Mothers Day!

A Homily at Vespers, Pilgrim Place Retirement Community
Claremont, CA 91711, September 5, 2013

ON BEING HISPANIC, by Clara Soto Ivey

The month of September has been designated as **Hispanic Heritage Month**. But Plácido Domingo said when receiving an award at the Kennedy Center, “Hispanic, is a word that Americans have invented to refer to us.” Years ago we were referred as **Spaniards**, if coming from Spain, or **Cubans, Mexicans** etc. depending on our country of origin, or **Spanish/Americans** if one wanted a more inclusive term. Now we are **Latino/Hispanics**, because sometimes some of us feel more comfortable with one term than with the other.

I thought to speak about **Hispanics** in general, but I was confronted with the reality that we, “**Hispanics**”, come in all sizes, all colors, all religions, all political affiliations, all sexual orientations. Some of us are bilingual, some of us speak English without an accent – well... not me! Some of us do **not** speak Spanish at all. Some of us were born in another country. Some of us were born here; yet we all feel Hispanic, and the Census classifies us as that.

Then, what make us “**Hispanics**?” It is probably correct to say that our roots and ancestry make us Hispanics, regardless of where we were born or how we arrived to the United States. But even if we accept this understanding, there are instances in which we cannot be generalized. There were immigrants in our countries of origin whose descendants may feel Hispanic too. Some of us are economic immigrants. Some are refugees, and yet others are political exiles. Some are legal residents. Some are undocumented residents. Others are naturalized U.S. citizens, and still others are U.S. citizens by birth. Which means that we are too diverse to fit in one box. Each one of us is a unique creation of God.

Thinking about the complexity of the subject, I have chosen to reflect about the Hispanic person that perhaps I know best: myself. And this is why I chose to dress tonight in red, white and blue. Because I feel I am wrapped in two different red, white, and blue flags. I describe myself as Cuban, Cuban to the very core of my being, and as American as apple pie. I love Fourth of July parades I do not miss voting in any election, I pay taxes. I am deeply concerned about the future of this country. With all the problems and imperfections, I am thankful for the country that gave me a home when I could not go back to my original home.

Because I have been a resident of Claremont for many years—I first came as a student in 1967— although I have lived in other places after that. Some people in this community have known me for a long time. Yet perhaps they do not know when I came to the United States. What brought me here? In which of the categories I described before, do I fit? Do I miss my country? Do I ever want to go back? What were the low points of leaving one’s country? What were some high moments? Do I consider myself a refugee? An immigrant? An exile? Who am I? What am I?

There are times when I am driving in Claremont, usually around sunset, and I ask myself, how is it that I was born in a very small town in “the most beautiful land that human eyes have ever seen,” as Columbus exclaimed when arriving in Cuba. I grew up surrounded by family and friends. I now live alone in this, yes, beautiful town that I call home; but that is so far away from my place of birth and my family. How did that happen? Well, this is my story, summarized, of course, for your benefit.

I came to the United States on September 12, 1960. Two days earlier, on September 10th, I had married a young American Methodist missionary, who was teaching at one of the Methodist schools in Cuba. I happened to be his Spanish teacher. He was returning to the United States to finish his education at Candler School of Theology at Emory University. The political situation in Cuba was drastically changing. Many of the changes that were taking place were necessary, but it was, nevertheless, becoming a very oppressive system of government. No one could anticipate it would last more than half a century. I, for one, came with a round trip ticket and the hope to go back at the end of the school year.

It was a very difficult time. My father, who had opposed Fidel Castro, was a political prisoner. Two months after I arrived at the U. S., it became obvious that the political situation was getting worse. The Communists were taking over our institutions, making it a Soviet-style concentration camp. My brother was a medical student. But heeding the calling to the ministry, he arrived in the U.S. to attend seminary shortly after I did. Like me, he also hoped to return to Cuba. His wife, fortunately, was also able to leave Cuba soon after that. But three months after we arrived, diplomatic relations between Cuba and the United States were broken. We were not allowed to go back. Communications were very difficult. No telephone calls were possible. Letters, always censored, sometimes took two to three months to reach us.

My mother came eight years later when the Johnson administration opened the so-called "Freedom Flights" that permitted some family reunification. She was encouraged to do so by my father, who was a political prisoner but was hoping to be part of an exchange program with the United States that traded political prisoners for tractors. It did not happen. He spent **eleven years, nine months and twenty-nine days** in one of the most sordid and inhumane prison systems. It took nine more long years after he was released from prison to be allowed to leave the country. It was not until Christmas of 1979, 20 years after he was imprisoned, when our family was able to sit around the table together. Now we were accompanied by six grandchildren who had grown loving a grandfather they had never seen.

We were blessed, however, by the privilege of having them, Mother and Father, living in Claremont the last 17 years of their lives. We had many celebrations together—birthdays, graduations, grandchildren's weddings, Christmases Cuban style. We even celebrated their 60th wedding anniversary with a beautiful reception and a Cuban music concert at the Emmanuel Presbyterian Church in Claremont, where they were members. For that, we are most grateful to God. Many other Cuban families of that generation were not so fortunate. In the early 1960's over 14,000 unaccompanied children were sent to the United States by their families.

There are thousands of Cubans who have lost their lives trying to cross the 90 mile stretch of ocean that separates Cuba from the United States. They used makeshift boats or rafts, trying to find freedom and to reunite with their families. Even though there have been some changes recently, there are still people facing prison, torture and even execution for the sole reason of seeking freedom. Unfortunately—and sadly too—these human rights violations hardly ever make front page news, or news at all.

Over the years, what have been some of my low and high moments?

Some of the lowest moments were in the early days when well-intentioned people would ask: "Are you going home for the holidays?" No, I cannot go home. Or, when expecting my sons, people would ask: "Is your mother coming to be with you for the birth of your child?" No, she cannot come. I know that this experience probably was true for many of you that chose to live and serve in foreign countries, but what I think made it different and more difficult was the impotence, the impotence of knowing that for us it was absolutely impossible to visit each other. The hardest part was, perhaps, the fact that I could not explain the situation to those asking such questions. As Elie Wiesel said speaking about the Holocaust: *"It is not because I cannot explain that you don't understand; it is because you don't understand that I cannot explain."*

Some of the high moments were on Sunday mornings. My life had been so drastically changed, that going to church on Sunday and singing the same familiar hymns, although in another language, was the only thing that made me feel at home. Then, I remember one day while still living in Atlanta, Georgia, when it rained. The smell of the freshly wet ground made me so happy that I wrote to a friend and I said teasingly, but seriously at the same time: *"You know, it rained just like in Cuba, from the sky to the ground!"* That experience gave me a great sense of assurance that God's blessings are the same everywhere and that ultimately my life was in God's hands wherever I

was. That was a high moment in my spiritual journey. Of course, some very important high moments were when each of my parents was able to come to the United States. Having my mother living with us, observing her deep faith and spiritual strength in the midst of all; later, seeing my father as a free man in a free country. Those were great moments, and, of course, there are many more.

Then, the next question, how do I see myself—as a refugee, as an immigrant, or as a political exile? Well, technically, I was never a refugee. I don't think I see myself as an immigrant either, since I did not come with the intention to establish myself permanently here. So, maybe the most appropriate classification would be an **exile**, since I cannot go back to live in my own country. But I am an exile of a country that doesn't exist, or rather, that exists only in my memories. Ironically perhaps, if I were now allowed to go back to the Cuba of today, I may choose **not** to go, for I cannot live in a country where there are no human rights, no respect for the dignity of the person, no system of law, no freedom to express oneself, nor freedom to travel and visit other countries of the world, as I so much like to do.

As an exile I feel I have lived not only in two countries, and I have two countries to love, but also that I have lived two lives. One life that began and ended in Cuba. Then another life that started when I came as a young bride to a new country, leaving everything behind. Or, is it true? Did it really end? Don't I live like most Cubans suffering this obsessive, agonizing nostalgia? Is it really two different lives, or is it two different persons in one life? I really don't know. Perhaps I will never know. Perhaps I don't want to know, and this is how I can keep my sanity.

Which brings me back to the notion of "*roots*." I feel that *roots* are very important. They inform us of our ancestry and of our past. They feed and nourish us. We need to have strong roots to be able to stand erect and to know who we are. Equally important are the *branches*. They give stability to the tree. They bear fruits or flowers, which allow us to be recognized, to be known. They offer shade and breeze to the weary. I feel my **branches** are my friends, my church, the students I have taught, and my former and present colleagues. They include my faith journey fellows who inspire and challenge me to be better each day. To be thankful to God for what I have and to be compassionate for those less fortunate.

My *branches* are my children, who have chosen to speak Spanish also with pride. They honor me by adding my last name to their names (Ivey-Soto they are). They constantly fill my life with pride and joy. My *branches* are my loved ones who sustain me and give me reason to live. My *branches* are **YOU** too.

As we celebrate this Hispanic Heritage Month I ache and pray for my **Hispanic Brothers and Sisters**, for those that need **BRANCHES, STRONG BRANCHES** to hold on and to sustain themselves, especially those living with the daily fear of deportation. I ask the God of Justice to guide our legislators to seek and implement more just and humane immigration laws. Would you do the same? **Muchísimas gracias.**

I invite you now to read with me Psalm 27. I have chosen this psalm because my father read it every night during the time he was in prison. I have also placed a white rose in the altar in memory of him, who said to us from the very beginning of his imprisonment: "**We must not hate.**" He taught us by example, to forgive. I thank God for his strength and for his witness.

PSALM 27

And now, may God's abundant grace and healing power be with each one of us now and always, **AMEN.**

Clara Soto Ivey, born in Cuba, lived most of her adult life in the U. S. She is a product of the missionary church. A member of Claremont United Methodist Church, she has served on several committees, including Refugees and Immigration Issues. Clara has taught Spanish for more than 20 years at The Webb Schools of California and at Pomona College. Clara resides at Pilgrim Place in Claremont, California.

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