

Asking For A Friend: Why Not Goddess?
FCCH August 9, 2026
Rev. Karla Miller

The only time I ever got called into the principal's office was when I was the bible teacher.

I got in trouble because one of my students went home and told his parents that I said Jesus was a girl. The parents — whose theological convictions were light years to the right of the Presbyterian (USA) territory of my parochial school — called the principal in a tizzy. The principal, who had very few spiritual convictions of his own, did what he thought was best: called everyone into the office.

Even though I had the chance to say that, in fact, I had never called Jesus a girl — though, would that really have been so bad? — what I had done was introduce the children to the full range of biblical images of God, some of which are female-gendered. Their real complaint, once we got down to it, was that I'd sung "She's Got the Whole World in Her Hands" with their child's class.

It was not a fun or productive conversation. I left it feeling bullied and bruised.

We are in week two of Asking for a Friend, and this week's question — I'll paraphrase — is: What do you think of using Goddess instead of God in worship?

At the root of that question, I think, is something like this: patriarchy has spent centuries narrowing the imagery used for God, until we settled into a confident, exclusive, mostly unexamined male gendering of the God of both testaments. So what's a progressive Christian supposed to do with that?

It's a complex question with more than one honest answer. Today I want to explore it with you from inside our own tradition.

In her book *A History of God*, Karen Armstrong traces how the concept of God has been imagined and reimagined across the Abrahamic traditions — Judaism, Christianity, Islam — from antiquity to now. Her core claim: there is no single, static "God" humanity has every worshipped. Every generation constructs an idea of God suited to its own needs, and when a concept stops working, it gets replaced or reinterpreted. The word "god" has never been one fixed thing.

Hebrew Bible scholar Tikva Frymer-Kensky spent a career researching the Mesopotamian world that ancient Israel's religion emerged from — a rich fabric of polytheism of gods and goddesses which I always assumed monotheism ruined. But she found those Mesopotamian goddesses weren't all that liberating. In actuality, they were ghettoized to hearth and home, while the male gods took wisdom, kingship, the running of the actual world. Having a goddess didn't mean women had power. Sometimes it meant men had all the power that mattered, with a goddess's blessing.

Here is the thing: the goddess wasn't erased by monotheism. She'd already been boxed in long before monotheism ever showed up.

Early Israelite religion wasn't sleek monotheism, either. It was formed within polytheism, and YHWH — the name God gives Godself to Moses at the burning bush — seemed to have some

company. At a site called Kuntilet Ajrud, in the Sinai, archaeologists found storage jars inscribed with the phrase "YHWH and his Asherah" — strong evidence that early Israelites worshipped YHWH alongside a goddess consort, the ancient mother goddess Asherah.

We see this again in Jeremiah 44: Judean refugees in Egypt tell the prophet they intend to go back to burning incense to the Queen of Heaven, because things went better for them when they did. Jeremiah, like the other prophets, is fighting against an ordinary, popular spiritual practice — not a fringe one.

This matters: monotheism didn't naturally evolve. It was a contested reform project — argued, legislated, and enforced against the popular religion of ordinary people. All that prophetic fury about Israel "whoring after other gods," about fertility cults — that's the prophets drawing a hard line against goddess worship that people were not spontaneously abandoning. They had to be told, over and over, sometimes with real coercion.

Here's my point: it wasn't oneness itself that excluded the goddess. It was a particular, patriarchal version of oneness. Nothing about "God is one" requires the One be male — that was a choice made by the patriarchal culture that lived inside monotheism.

However, Israelite religion never fully erased the evidence of the presence of the goddess. Wisdom — Hokmah in Hebrew, Sophia in Greek — is the grammatically feminine face of the holy, personified as a co-creator figure right there in Proverbs 8, said to be present at the beginning of the world.

Which leads to another assumption I used to carry: that Israel's YHWH started out genderless, and only became male later, through patriarchal narrowing. Unfortunately, not true.

Ancient Hebrew, the primary language of the OT, has no neuter gender — every noun and verb is masculine or feminine. YHWH is referenced with masculine grammar from the earliest manuscripts we have, including The Song of the Sea, in Exodus 15, which is among the oldest poetry in the whole Bible. There was no neutral option waiting to be corrupted. Masculine was the default gender for the Holy Name from the start.

This is true functionally, as well—the Bible overwhelmingly references YHWH as warrior, king, father, husband to Israel-as-bride. These are not neutral administrative metaphors. These are patriarchal household and political roles, mapped straight onto God.

Over centuries, Jewish and Christian theology did develop to where God transcends embodiment — and therefore, in theory, transcends gender. But much liturgical language, to this day, has stayed stubbornly masculine anyway. What the tradition claims philosophically and what it does linguistically does not match, however much people try to explain that away.

Feminist theologian Mary Daly — Catholic until she left the fold — put it this way: if God is male, then the male is God. Say "Him" and "Father" and "King" and "Lord" long enough, and it stops mattering what we officially believe about God having no body. The mind builds an image anyway, and the image is male. Language doesn't just describe the sacred — it trains the imagination toward what gets to count as sacred-shaped.

Using feminine language for God isn't importing something foreign. We're not inventing a goddess — Sophia, Hokmah, Lady Wisdom is already in Proverbs 8, present at creation, playing before God. This is recovery, not innovation. We're stopping the suppression of something that was always in the room.

And "Goddess" does different theological work than "God." Masculine language has clustered, across most of our history, around transcendence — the God above, who rules, who judges from a distance. Feminine language clusters around immanence — the God within, who indwells, close as breath, as blood, as birth. If what some of us need right now is nearness — a God found in bodies, in the dirt, in the intimate and not only the sovereign — then Goddess isn't a substitute word. It's doing work "God" alone was never built to do.

But remember: Frymer-Kensky didn't study the goddess we imagine now.

She studied ancient goddesses people actually knelt before, and what she found challenges the idea that the word alone does the saving work. Those goddesses were real, honored, worshipped — and it didn't protect the women who worshipped them. That's the hard truth under the beautiful one: language matters, and language is not enough.

Friends, we could rewrite every hymn in this building, call God only "She" from now until Advent, and still end up with women making the coffee and men making the decisions. The word was never the only thing broken. It was never going to be the only thing that fixes it.

So — Goddess, or God? This was never only a vocabulary question. Change the word without changing who holds power in the room, and we've just done what Sumer did four thousand years ago — given the sacred a feminine name and handed real authority to someone else anyway. Refuse to change the word at all, hiding behind "God has no body, so it doesn't matter" — and that's just as dishonest. We've watched, for centuries, exactly how much it mattered.

One more thing worth naming — a small thing, almost a grammar joke, except it isn't. In English, "goddess" isn't its own word. It's "god" plus the feminine suffix -ess, the same pattern as prince and princess, actor and actress. Masculine is the default; feminine is the marked exception, the one that needs an extra syllable to explain itself. That's an accident of English, not Hebrew — but it's a near-perfect mirror of everything we've just walked through: "god" got to be the universal category, and "goddess" became the special case that has to ask permission to exist.

So maybe the answer isn't which word wins. Swapping one gendered word for another gendered-as-derivative word was never going to fix what happened — the boxing-in, the missing body, the suppressed history. Maybe we don't switch words. Maybe we recover what both, used alone, have always left out.

Because whichever word we say on a Sunday morning, the real question was always this: who, in this room, in this world, actually gets to be made in the image of God? We all do — and I'd include everything in all of creation.

This makes a case for more expansive language for God, doesn't it?
You already have it.

Last Sunday I asked on Facebook what people think of when they hear the word "God" in worship. The answers were wonderful — Holy Love, Wide Open Gate, Source, Ground, Rock, Uncertainty, Light, Morgan Freeman, Presence, Immortal, Invisible. I love all of it — language that opens rather than limits how we conceive the Sacred.

A couple of people said "Trauma." This breaks my heart, but I understand it, for anyone who's experienced spiritual abuse at the hands of Christianity.

In our worship here, we rarely use gendered pronouns for the Divine at all. We say God; I don't think we've ever said Goddess. I'm honestly not sure yet how that sits with me, given everything I've just laid out.

But what does land, clearly, is this: our job is not to limit the Holy with our words, but to find the most expansive, spacious language we can for Ineffable Love, Holy Grace, Deep Sophia. So, the invitation is this —

Close your eyes if that helps. When I say the word — God, or Goddess, or Higher Power — notice what rises in you. Don't polish it. Don't pick the "right" one. Just notice it.

On the count of three, say it out loud. All of us, together, whatever word came. One. Two. Three.

[let the room say it]

Listen to that. That overlapping, imperfect noise — that's what the Holy Name has always sounded like. Never one word. Never one voice.

Go now, and call the sacred by whatever word reached you a moment ago.

And when even that word fails you — because every name eventually does — let the failure be holy too. Something new will always emerge. If history has taught us anything, it's that the Sacred Divine has never once stood still. It has always been moving, changing, getting born again in whatever word a room full of people needs next.

Amen.