

Who From Our Mother's Arms
Ephesians 3: 14- 19; II Timothy 1: 3-7
May 9, 2004
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This afternoon, after my wife and I have enjoyed a Sharks hockey game, our children will be hosting a bar-be-cue for their mother. Even if the Sharks were to lose, having her children put on a meal for her means it will be a great day for her, and, if she's pleased I'm pleased; and we will have gotten past all the ambivalence that seems to come with Mother's Day. Yes, I said ambivalence. In my experience Mother's Day is often a conflicted celebration. Two years ago I suggested to a church that they do what you are doing this morning - create a space where members of the congregation can bring a picture of their mothers - not as an idol to be worshiped but as a act of honor to those who have given so much to our lives. In that other church, the suggestion got rave reviews, as in ranting and raving. "What about those who had poor relationships with their mothers? Won't this be upsetting to them?" The issue came before the board of Deacons and they voted against having people bring pictures. I shouldn't have been surprised. Ambivalence has been a part of Mothers' Day celebrations right from the start.

The first Mothers' Day I know anything about was celebrated in the Church of England 300 plus years ago. It was called "Mothering Sunday," and was celebrated in the middle of Lent. The word "Mothering" came partly from the fact that one of the scripture readings (Galatians 4: 25, 26) appointed for that Sunday contains the sentence that "Jerusalem is the mother of us all;" partly from the fact that on this Sunday people who normally worshiped at outlying "chapels of ease" made a point to travel to the mother church for worship; and partly from the fact that following worship children who no longer lived with their mother made a special effort to visit her. Women did not travel much up through the 17'th century and if your children lived in a different community, Mothering Sunday might well be the only time you'd see them all year long.

All this is good but by the 19'th Century the English church had elevated motherhood to the level of an icon of spiritual purity. Hymns were written of mothers who died of a broken heart. Sometimes their prodigal children repented but it was always too late:

The words to one of these hymns can be found on the screen behind me:

**Tell mother I'll be there,
In answer to her pray'r;
The message, blessed Saviour, to her bear;
Tell mother I'll be there,
Heav'ns joys with her to share;
Yes, tell my darling mother I'll be there.**

- Susan S. Tamke, *Make a Joyful Noise Unto the Lord*, pg. 144.

So saccharine! The urge to honor mothers, in the hands of some, became a tool to

manipulate wayward children back to the paths of faithfulness. And manipulation worked then as it always works: always on a few but never on the many. Ambivalence has long been a part of Mother's Day.

In this country the call for a Mother's Day was at first, a peace initiative. Julia Ward Howe, she who wrote the words for The Battle Hymn of the Republic, invited American mothers to join with her in speaking out for peace in 1872. She was disturbed by the blood being shed in Europe as a part of the Franco-Prussian War. She believed that it was mothers who suffered the most.... through the needless loss of their sons and husbands. But there was much ambivalence and the day did not catch on.

In 1907 another woman, Anna Jarvis, from Philadelphia began to promote an idea that had been her mother's. At the end of the Civil War Mother Jarvis tried to establish a Mother's Friendship Day as a way of healing wounds left by the war. She hoped that mothers on both sides of the mason-Dixon line could reach out to one another in mutual respect. When Mother Jarvis died, her daughter, Anna, took up the cause and by 1910 her mother's home state of West Virginia officially recognized Mother's Day. In 1911 a number of other states followed suit and in 1914 President Woodrow Wilson proclaimed that the second Sunday in May would be a national holiday in honor of all mothers.

What Anna Jarvis hadn't counted upon was commercialization. Once stores began to advertise that their product was just what mother wanted she became terribly upset: "This is not what I intended. I wanted a day for sentiment, not for profit!" She tried to get a court injunction to stop a local Mother's Day festival that she saw as being no more than a carnival.

In the 1920's Anna Jarvis was arrested for disturbing the peace at a convention of war mothers. She had never intended that Mother's Day would be a means of glorifying war. She had meant that peace would be honored.

By 1948, the year of her death, Anna Jarvis was telling anyone who would listen that she regretted ever having promoted Mother's Day. But one of the reporters present to hear her noted that she was saying this from a nursing home room bedecked with Mother's Day cards from all over the world.

Ambivalence. It has always been a part of Mother's Day.

When I was a child, Mother's Day, was right up there with Christmas and Easter, one of the most sacred days of the year. Both our grandmother's had died before my brother, sister and I had been born so our mother had the stage all to herself. The day before we would go with our Dad to the florist and buy a corsage for Mom and a carnation for ourselves. These were carefully "hidden" in the refrigerator. Next morning we wore our flowers to church and the minister would have fun discovering the youngest and oldest mothers present. As I was growing up the oldest mother was always the same woman except for the year the Duftons imported their aged granny and boy, did the fir fly!

The scripture reading was often the one we heard first this morning:

**Rooted and established in love (we are able)
to grasp how wide and long and high and deep
is God's love in Jesus.... - Ephesians 3: 17b, 18.**

And the sermon logically followed. "A mother's love is the best mirror we have of God's love.... freely given, never withdrawn."

We'd stand and sing: "Now thank we all our God," with special emphasis upon the line "who from our mother's arms hath blessed us on our way."

It worked for us. But there must have been some ambivalence for by the time I was ordained and leading services of worship Mother's Day had been exorcized from the church calendar. In the United Church of Christ it had been replaced by "The Festival of the Christian Home."

But if the truth were to be told, I probably wouldn't have emphasized Mother's Day in my first parish anyway. The people in those three small Vermont churches would have loved it, but I was in mid-process of breaking away. It would not have been a good time.

San Keen once said that strong parents produce strong children who are destined to either conform to their values or to wage a fierce battle to escape the mold. He didn't see much middle ground. My parents were strong parents and the battle was sometimes fierce. We didn't talk about respecting each other's choices, we weren't even talking about where we'd hold Thanksgiving dinner: "Of course you will all be come home!"

Somewhere among my archival treasures I have a letter from my mother in which she offers the opinion that it would have been better had she been born a salmon. I got the message. Salmon spawn and then die. They are spared the injury of indifferent children.

In the 1960's I was not preaching about motherhood. I was caught up in ambivalence.

Nor was I emphasizing Mother's Day in the 1970's - my 30's. I was busy with important stuff such as advising conscientious objectors as to what to say to their draft board; such as protesting against the Vietnam War, working against racism and poverty. If anything was to be said about motherhood it would have to be about the need for better methods of birth control for rampant population growth was a problem all over the world.

By the 1980's - my 40's - My wife, children and I were living in California. My mother was thousands of miles away. My own children were beginning to show a will of their own. My perspective was beginning to change.

Each January, beginning in 1979, I'd attend a ministers' meeting in Florida and then go to Massachusetts to spend a few days with my parents before returning to the west coast. It was usually cold. Often there would be snow on the ground and my parents, now elderly,

stayed indoors. The pace of life, the number of on-task chores per hour, came way down. I'd play cribbage with my Dad, turn the crank on the bread maker for my Mom and we'd talk about remembered things. It was in these years that I started offering old fashioned Mother's Day sermons. My first may have seemed to be still mired in ambivalence for it's title contained 24 words: "Showing God's Love: a Sermon as to Why This Preacher has Never Before Preached a Mother's Day Sermon and Why He Does So Now."

Too soon the 80's were over and so too my parents' lives. By the 1990's I was fully appreciative of the fact that my parents had provided a place where I could count on being loved and accepted. Such places are rare and to lose one of them constitutes a huge loss. I've been preaching about the importance of mothers ever since.

Usually I begin with the book of Ephesians:

Because we have been rooted and established in love
(we are able to) grasp how wide and long and high and
deep is God's love... 3: 17, 18.

Always I ask that we sing "Now Thank We All Our God," and hope that we all place special emphasis on the words: "who from our Mother's arms hath blessed us on our way."

And, today, I want to add a third part and a poem.

The third part is to say that the prophet Hosea showed us that ambivalence exists also with God. Hosea made God sound like a mother:

When Israel was a child, I loved him,
and out of Egypt I called my son.
... the more I called, the more he went from me.
It was I who taught Ephriam to walk
I who took him up in my arms...
I led him with cords of human kindness,
I was to him like those who lift infants to their cheek...
But my people are bent on turning away from me.
(And here God considers possible punishments....)
How can I give up my Ephriam?
My heart grows warm and tender... - 11: 1-9

And the poem is by Thomas Carlisle, onetime Presbyterian Minister, who brings it all together as if God & mother were inseparable:

O God, my Mother,
You carried me
from conception.
You delivered me
from darkness.

**You nourished me
and sustained me.
You let me crawl
and taught me to walk.
You put the first word
in my mouth.
You encouraged me.
You guided me.
You agonized
In my hurts
and in my hurtfulness.
You let me go
but never stopped loving,
O God, my Mother. - *Eve and After*, pg. 101**

What a gift....love without question! Blessed are all who have done it.

Happy Mother's Day!