

Enterprise 14 May 2006 (11:00)

“Who Is My Mother?”

I John 4:7-21

Matthew 12:46-50

Knowing what to say in a Mothers’ Day sermon isn’t easy. I guess that I got spooked about preaching on Mothers’ Day while I was still in seminary. Our good friends Jon and Kathy Powers invited us to spend the weekend with them during our first year at Boston University. Jon was working as the youth director at a church in the suburbs, and we went to church with them on Mothers’ Day in what must have been 1972. There we heard what I have decided is one of the two worst sermons I have ever heard preached.

That sermon was a cliché-ridden and syrupy flight into unreality about what that preacher thought of as the ideals of motherhood. In it the love of a mother was sentimentalized, and that is what happens so often in the way that we observe this day. There is nothing wrong with sentiment, which I define as a deep personal feeling of great importance, but sentimentality, as I see it, is a perversion of sentiment, because it is unreal.

In looking back through my sermon files this week, I discovered that I preached my first Mothers’ Day sermon on May 9, 1976, in Jay, Florida. On that day, Lynn was just two weeks away from being a mother, but she didn’t know it. Our son, Micah, had already been born, and we knew that we had been approved for an adoption, but we didn’t get the word about our good fortune until May 25. Even thirty years ago, I was struggling to know what to say in a sermon on Mothers’ Day.

Many people have trouble over one day of the year being Mothers' Day, for they feel that on every day we ought to appreciate and honor our mothers. Can a greeting card or even flowers once a year make up for inattention and unconcern the other 364 days? That kind of attention and concern focused on mothers once a year can be phony, and we in the church don't need any more phoniness.

In addition to the sentimentalizing of Mothers' Day, we are faced with another area of concern about a special day for mothers. This is the area of concern about the roles of the sexes, and in light of this concern over roles, in light of recent controversies over gender issues, and in light of radical feminism, what do we need to say on Mothers' Day?

Some people object to the male, female role differentiation of fatherhood and motherhood. Some question whether or not there is any difference in the emotional make-up of men and women. Surely we all realize that much of what we consider to be masculine and feminine is defined by our culture. Society at large teaches us that it is manly to play football, but not to play with dolls. It is fine for women to cry and display their feelings, but not for men. But is there any difference in the emotional make-up of a man and a woman? Can a woman be a father or a man a mother.

Such questions as these may seem silly, or they may be bothersome, but the concern and the idea behind them is valid, I think. How do you first think of yourself? What is more important and basic to your identity? Is it

that you are male or female, or that you are a human person. To be sure, our personhood is most basic, for it is what every one of us in this sanctuary has in common. We are not all female, or left-handed, or red-headed, or over thirty, but we are all persons!

The controversy over the masculine references to God goes hand in hand with our concern here. God is not a male; Jesus said that God is like a good father. In some biblical imagery, God is said to be like a good mother. Surely, the female is creative, too. But God is God and transcends all gender and sexual roles. Likewise, I am a person, and that is more basic and important than my maleness. Jesus talked to us all together as persons; he said the same things to the men and to the women. We are all alike in the eyes of God.

Let me now read again some words of Jesus on “Motherhood” and share my interpretations with you.

“While he was still speaking to the crowds, his mother and his brothers were standing outside, wanting to speak to him. Someone told him, ‘Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.’ But to the one who had told him this, Jesus replied, ‘Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?’ And pointing to his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.’” Matthew 12:46-50

We talk about the importance of being a member of the family, the church family, the Christian family. Paul called it the Body of Christ. This

family is our concern today, too. You are my father, mother, brother, sister, daughter, son, aunt, uncle, and/or cousin when you care about me and allow me to care about you. The relationship is what is important; the love between and among persons is the acid test for whether or not the relationship is real and meaningful. Jesus said that you are his mother or brother or sister when you do the will of God. I believe that the will of God, according to Jesus, is loving God and one's neighbor. We are members of the family when we love God and each other.

In our experience with mothers, what is really important? Is it not the love between ourselves and our mothers? The actual biological fact of giving birth to us is secondary to the love in the relationship. Some folks are not fortunate in having biological mothers who truly love them. Others have had real mothers who were no blood kin to them. Motherhood, then, does not necessarily have anything to do with biology. I was fortunate to have a bunch of mothers: my biological mother, my grandmother, my older sister, an older cousin, whom we called Mama Ruthie, and four aunts, who lived nearby. Each of these persons loved me; they helped me to be who I am. Our relationships were full of meaning, and I thank God for each of them. Only one of these gave me birth, but they were all mothers to me.

Motherhood, then, is a state of being, or better a state of acting, for it is not static. It is the state of an active relationship between two individuals. It is a state of love, of concern, of willingness to give of oneself freely to the other. True motherhood, like true fatherhood, brotherhood, and sisterhood, is

selfless love. Think of Moses' mother, who loved him enough to risk losing him so that he might live. Yes, motherhood involves letting go, and that is not so easy to do.

Motherhood, fatherhood, sisterhood, and brotherhood are all very similar. Jesus spoke of them together, and he made no distinctions among them. They all involve deep unselfish love for one another. The Christian lifestyle calls us to be brothers and sisters, fathers and mothers to each other. We are called to be members of the family of Christ. This is certainly what John was talking about in our Epistle lection from I John this morning. When we love each other as Christ has first loved us, then everyone will know that we are disciples of Jesus Christ and that we are part of the family of God.

Isn't it a wonderful experience today to have so many children involved in giving leadership in our worship. You fully understand that this didn't just happen. These children have been blessed to have so many persons interested in them and willing to teach them and work with them and love them. I believe that they all would tell you that they feel that they belong to the family that is our church. You have been their mothers and fathers, aunts and uncles—you have been their kin as you have nurtured them in the faith and have fulfilled the vows you took at their baptisms and confirmations “to surround these persons with a community of love and forgiveness, that they may grow in their trust of God, and be found faithful in their service to others.”

Finally, today as we celebrate Mothers' Day, let us not sentimentalize about our mothers. Rather, let us love them, thank God for them, and in so doing, let us dedicate ourselves to being committed members of the family of Jesus, the Christ. Let us seek to be mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters together by doing the will of God. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.