

Mother's Day

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Holland, Michigan
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Mt 23:37; Ps 131; Pr 31:10-28

I have often advised my students to make sure that, at least every once in a while, they preach on a text they would not have chosen. I tell them to do this, because this forces us to struggle with a text, not to take for granted that we already know what it says, to be challenged by it.

In a way, today I am getting a dose of my own medicine. Not that I am preaching about a text that I don't like, but that I am preaching on a subject I would not have chosen. Let me go ahead and confess it quite clearly: I would rather not be preaching on Mother's Day.

This is not because I did not love my mother, nor because she was not a good mother. On the contrary, she was the best mother I could have had. Her mother's love and care were profound and unforgettable. Besides that, she was an educator and had it not been for her I would not have been privileged to receive an education many others deserved at least as much as I, and were it not for her and for the education she provided, I would never have been able to come here before you.

And then, when my brother and I were full grown, she and my father devoted themselves, practically as loving parents, to the illiterate multitudes, traveling all over Latin America and beyond teaching people how to read. Today, long after they have both passed away, that organization continues to exist and to thrive, and has now expanded well into Africa.

I did love my mother. I do love my mother. I am glad that there is this day to honor her

and many more like her. So that is not the reason why I would rather not be preaching on Mother's Day.

The reason is twofold.

First of all, I am well aware that there are many for whom Mother's Day does not evoke happy memories similar to those it evokes in me. While most of us have had wonderful mothers, there are also many who do not, or did not. While for most of us, it is quite natural to love our mothers, for many it is difficult. There are many who have suffered neglect or abuse; many who are still suffering the effects of their mother's addictions; many whose tensions with their mother are not yet resolved. There are also many women who wished they could be mothers but are not. And others who are still mourning the loss of a son or daughter.

To speak to people in such circumstances about the beauties of motherly love, as if their not being able to experience it were their fault, or as if it makes them less than normal, would be cruel, and I refuse to do it.

The second reason has to do with how I understand the nature and purpose of preaching. Preaching is not about saying nice things to people. Nor is it about telling people what they ought to do and what they ought not to do. Preaching is about God. Preaching is about the gospel. Preaching is about this wonderful God of ours, whose love pours out to us in the gospel.

For these reasons, if it were entirely up to me, I would be reminding you that it is now thirty-six days since Easter, and that therefore Thursday would be a good day in which to celebrate the Lord's ascension, forty days after his resurrection.

But it is Mother's Day and, even though at first I was reluctant, now I gladly come to you to tell you, not so much about mothers, but rather about this wonderful God of ours whose love is manifest in mothers. Some of us might say that our mothers gave us religion. But it is also true that our God gave us mothers. Mothers are not just something that happens. At their best, mothers are a gift from God, a sign and even an image of God's love.

This is so true that much of what we say about God and what God means in our lives we can also say about mothers.

Think about it. Think first about nurturing and sustenance. Long before any of us remember, even before we were born, our mothers were nurturing us. Then, when we were born, we could not have survived without our mother's sustenance. First with her own body, and then with her patience, spoonful by spoonful, our mothers nurtured us.

In this, mothers are a sign and even an image of God's nurturing and sustaining love. As the prophet says, "The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb, he named me" (Is 49.1). Long before we existed, long before our mothers conceived us, this eternal God of ours was preparing a world that would nurture and sustain us. And long after we were weaned from our mothers' breasts, the Lord God, like an ever-present mother, still feeds us, nurturing both body and soul.

It is as a constant reminder of this nurturing and sustaining love that God has given us mothers.

Next, think about safety and protection. Even in the animal world, mothers are proverbially protective of their children. As a young man hiking in the Appalachian Mountains, I

was told that if I saw a she-bear with her cubs I should stay clear. We humans were born being absolutely defenseless, into a world where we would never have been able to survive were it not for our mothers' protection. The very phrase, "in our mothers' arms," immediately brings to mind a sense of security and protection. Without our mothers, the world into which we were born would have overwhelmed and destroyed us. A mother not only nurtures, but also protects. She protects us not only from real threats, but also from the fear of imagined perils —as when she walks with a child into a dark room, making the child feel safe despite "things that go 'bump' in the night."

In this too, mothers are a sign of God's love —of God's protective love. It is because, like a loving shepherd or an ever-present mother, God walks with us into every dark room of life, that the Psalmist can say, "even though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil." And Jesus himself expresses his love for his people, and his desire to protect them, as those of a mother hen: "Jerusalem, how often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings!" (Mt 23.37).

And this motherly love of God, protecting and guarding us, does not fade away as we grow, as we become able to live without our mother's protection. As a very much-loved hymn says, God is the One "Who, from our mothers' arms, hath blessed us on our way with countless gifts of love, and still is ours today."

It is as a constant reminder of this protective and reassuring love that God has given us mothers.

Third, besides nurture and protection, a mother provides guidance. It was from our

mothers that we learned our first principles of behavior. It was our mother who taught us how to wield a spoon and a pencil, how not to lie, how to express our love, how to plan our lives. It was our mother who sought to guide us in those teenage years of rebellion and confused identity, of great hopes often dimmed by despair. It was our mother who rejoiced in our first steps, and then rejoiced in many other significant steps in our lives. A good mother provides that guidance, not to show that she is strong and can set the rules, but because she knows what is best for her child.

In this too, mothers are a sign of God's love —of God's guiding love. Ours is a God of guidance. This is why God has given the Law and all of Scripture —not to subject us to God's whims, but to guide us along the paths that are best for us. It is God who has given us a mind and a body so we were able to learn how to wield a spoon and a pencil, and so we can still learn more and more about life, about its meaning, and about what God knows is best for us. Without such guidance, we would be like a motherless child wandering around an empty and meaningless world.

It is as a constant reminder of this guiding love that God has given us mothers.

Fourth, a good mother knows how to provide space for her child to grow. Hers is not a possessive, but a liberating love. This is perhaps the most difficult part of a parent's love: having to step back, to let the child try out new things, even at the risk of failure. A good mother sees her child trying to walk and does not rush to hold its hand so it won't totter and perhaps fall. She knows that if her child never totters it will never learn how to walk; and if it does not learn how to walk and how to get up after a fall, it will never learn how to run. So, she steps back. She

steps back, not out of indifference, but out of love —out of a love that knows that even through its tottering and falling, the child is growing as it should.

In this too, mothers are a sign of God's love —of God's liberating love. God too gives us space to grow, even though at times it might seem as if God did not care. Just think how many of the parables of Jesus have to do with an apparently absent master, with the master going away, with the bridegroom not being there. All of these point to this God whose love —much like a mother's— is such as to give us room to grow, to find our own way, even at the risk of stumbling. To us, as to that child who is learning how to walk, it may seem that God is not there. But God is there, watching over us, cheering us in our baby steps, giving us the freedom to grow into the mature children of God we are called to be.

It is as a constant reminder of this liberating love that God has given us mothers.

And, finally, a good mother's love is constant and unconditional. From the very beginning, as she was looking forward to our birth and perhaps knitting booties for us, even as she rejoiced in us, she knew that we would not always do as she willed. She knew that at some point we would disobey. She knew that at some point we would cause her pain and even grief. And yet she loved us! She loved us then, even before we existed; she loved us through the times of our rebellion and disobedience; and she loves us still, no matter what we have done or what we have become.

In this too, mothers are a sign of God's love —of God's constant and unconditional love. Even before creating us, God knew that we would be disobedient; that we would cause God pain and even grief. And yet God created us! And yet God loved us! And yet, God still loves us!

And yet, God will forever love us!

It is as a constant reminder of this constant and unconditional love that God has given us mothers.

I said at the beginning that one reason why I am reluctant to preach on Mother's Day is that there are many mothers who do not rise to the highest standards of motherhood, that there are neglectful mothers; that there are abusive mothers; that there are possessive and oppressive mothers; that there are many whose memories of their mothers are not all that comforting. There are mothers still grieving over the loss of their children. There are women who were told that their purpose in life was to be mothers and are frustrated and perplexed because that purpose has not been fulfilled.

Now I can say that this constant and unconditional love of God is the reason why I dare and even rejoice to preach on Mother's Day. I dare preach on Mother's Day because this unconditional and constant love of God means that, if you feel guilty because you were not the mother you should have been, God loves and forgives you; that if you still carry the burden of never having been reconciled with your mother, God loves you and is willing to take that burden away from you; that if you did not become the person your mother hoped you would be, God is still ready to make you the person God calls you to be; that if some of the dreams of your youth were not realized, God promises a life much fuller than your best dream.

And so, on this Mother's Day, even as we celebrate and remember our mothers, we praise God. We praise God for mothers. We praise God for being like a mother to each and every one of us. We praise God for love. We praise God for life. So be it! Amen!