

The Mothering Love of God

The Sixth Sunday of Easter, Year A

Acts 17:22-31; Psalm 66:7-18; 1 Peter 3:13-22; John 14:15-21

May 14, 2023; St. Matthew's, Sunbury;

The Rev. Dina Carter Ishler, Deacon in Charge

In the name of our Eternally Creative God, who is Life Abundant, Love Overflowing, and Spirit Out-Pouring, Amen.

Over fifty countries set aside a day that is known as ‘Mother’s Day’, and today is our day. *There is no one right way to “mother” someone- and just as all families look different, if we take time to remember all the people who have “mothered” us in our lives they will all look very different as well.* To all of you who have ever mothered anyone- the little people in your home or church or neighborhood or your pets or maybe everyone you meet, my prayer for you is that you will truly know just how much this kind of love matters- because it helps us to connect us with what God’s love looks like in ways that we can understand and share.

I have been blessed in my own life by being “mothered” by a great many people. Elderly aunts who had no children by birth delighted in spoiling me; one of them ‘borrowed’ me every spring for the Mother-Daughter banquet in her church’s social hall and we dressed up and wore corsages and laughed a lot. The neighbors who lived across the street in my childhood made every occasion special with cards and flowers and gifts, and both my grandmothers thought I was practically perfect, much to my parents’ dismay. These dear people gathered every holiday in our living room to fuss over homemade cards and school achievements and offer plenty of honest advice if they thought I needed it. Our children had this same gift of loving community who “mothered” them both fiercely and tenderly- including all the church families who shared in their growing-up years and loved them with such complete and unconditional love that it would be easy to take it for granted. As the

person who gave birth to them, I will always be profoundly grateful for this.

Stories like these are wonderful, but we all experience seasons where the kinds of love we need to thrive and become most fully ourselves are not freely available to us. Sometimes our mothering relationships are in need of healing and we feel sorrowful and alone. Sometimes love is truest when it means letting go and loving us from a safe distance, maybe allowing someone else to raise us. Sometimes the ones we long to mother are not in our arms, or our mother figures are no longer in this life, and we have love that feels as if it has no place to go. We are human and for better or worse, we are always going to love and be loved by other human beings in both healthy and broken ways. It is only through the fullness of God's care for us, loving us as both father and mother, that we can lean into the wholeness God longs for us to know and we can love others in safe and healthy ways.

It is fascinating that among its middle eastern neighbors, ancient Israel stands alone in worshipping a divine being who does not have clearly defined male or female characteristics, emphasizing in this that God is sovereign above all these other gods. Although the words we use most regularly refer to God as a “father”- as we hear in today’s Gospel where it is the Father who will give us the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, to be with us forever- holy scripture also talks to us of God in language that portrays a maternal way of being. God is a mother bird who shelters her children under her wings, as heard in the book of Ruth: “May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.” The psalms keep this imagery alive with pleas to God that say: “Keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings” (psalm 17) and “I will take refuge in the shadow of your wings until the disaster has passed” (psalm 57). Jesus’ own words

contain this imagery when he laments: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often have I longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing.” The prophet Isaiah is fond of painting God as an actual human mother: “Thus says our God: as a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem” and “Can a mother forget the baby she has nursed and have no compassion on the child she has borne?” And lest we think that only nurturing examples exist for a maternal way of being, the prophet Hosea says: “Like a bear robbed of her cubs, I will attack them and destroy them”- the fiercely protective side of mothering for sure!

Christian history is also filled with reflections on the maternal ways that God loves what God has created, not only human beings but indeed all the world. Medieval mystic Meister Eckhart says this of God: “What does God

do all day long? God gives birth to the world.” St. Anselm, twelfth century Archbishop of Canterbury, writes eloquently: “Jesus, as a mother you gather your people to you, you are gentle with us as a mother with her children. In sickness you nurse us and with pure milk you feed us.” Julian of Norwich, whose feast day we celebrated on May 8, wrote extensively on Jesus as our true Mother “in whom we are endlessly born.” And no conversation of this kind would be complete without mentioning Mary, the mother of our Lord, whose mothering began with her courageous “yes” to co-creating with God and her reflections upon all that this motherhood might entail, both her faithfulness and her very human parenting undoubtedly shaping her son’s way of being in the world.

When we invite images like these to help us tell the story of God’s love for us- *when we open ourselves to the vastness of God’s love for God’s people, receiving it through the medium of being loved by those who are*

human mothers and fathers to us, we open ourselves to a deeper comprehension of how to love others as we are called to do. Our relationship with Jesus is both intimate and transformational because it involves the sharing of his life, through the invitation to abide in God's love- God's Spirit- given to us for always. "You know him" says Jesus in today's Gospel, speaking of the Advocate, the Spirit of truth, given to be with us forever, "because he abides with you, and he will be in you. If you love me, you will be faithful to my teachings- *I will not leave you orphaned but am coming to be with you forever.*"

To be human is hard, and as we already mentioned, the people we count on to love us will let us down. This all-abiding love which Jesus speaks about can seem far away. But sometimes, when our hearts are able to both receive love and give it away freely- with no conditions or thought of reward- we can point each other towards the One whose love never fails us. The One whom, as our

Collect today says, has prepared for us such good things as surpass our understanding, which exceed all that we can desire. *And this is precisely why how we love each other matters so much:* because when we have been hurt, our beliefs in safety and trust shattered, it can be hard spiritual work to believe in an all-loving and always-present God who has promised “Because I live, you also will live” and, as Paul says in our reading from Acts, *“indeed God is not far from each one of us. For in him we live and move and have our being, for we are his offspring.”* God is love, and so this love flows both from us and towards us: we thrive in our human relationships when God as a Beloved Parent is made real in the love others give us- AND those who love us, here on earth or in Heaven, our human mother and father figures, help to make God’s love real and understandable and accessible to us.

On this Mother's Day, I share with you this canticle
by Julian of Norwich, "A song of true Motherhood":

God chose to be our mother in all things *
and so made the foundation of his work,
most humbly and most pure, in the Virgin's womb.

God, the perfect wisdom of all, *
arrayed himself in this humble place.

Christ came in our poor flesh *
to share a mother's care.

Our mothers bear us for pain and for death; *
our true mother, Jesus, bears us for joy
and endless life.

Christ carried us within him in love and travail, *
until the full time of his passion.

And when all was completed
and he had carried us so for joy, *
still all this could not satisfy
the power of his wonderful love.

All that we owe is redeemed in truly loving God, *

for the love of Christ works in us;

Christ is the one whom we love. *Amen.*