A MOTHER’S LOVE
MAY 11, 2014
MOTHER’S DAY

I grew up in a very traditional home and family.
My mom and dad were married, stayed married, and are still married to this very day.
My dad was the bread-winner,
a coat-and-tie business man, always working to move the company ahead,
and at the dinner table talked about his day at the office.
He was a strict disciplinarian,
but also freely showed his love with hugs and kisses,
and plenty of generosity toward his family.
My mom was a stay-at-home mom.
She was the one who was always there.
She cooked and cleaned and kept an eye on us kids.
She was the one who rendered first aid when needed.
She always had the door open for any of our friends to come over.
And if we wanted to go somewhere else,
she always knew where we were going and who we were going with.
They went to all our band concerts.
They watched over our school grades.
Together they made sure we did our homework.
I can still remember thinking I would die of old age,
still chained to the kitchen table trying to memorize the multiplication tables.
They made sure we brushed our teeth morning and night, washed up daily,
and went to church.
Sunday school, worship, youth group, youth choir we were there.
They ensured the seeds of faith were sown in our lives.
It was a pretty healthy way to grow up.
Sadly, today many kids do not grow up that way.
Let me read a short piece from a recent article in the Wall Street Journal:
“The two-parent family has declined rapidly in recent decades.
In 1960, more than 76% of African-Americans and nearly 97% of whites
were born to married couples.
Today the percentage is 30% for blacks and 70% for whites.
The out-of-wedlock birthrate for Hispanics surpassed 50% in 2006.
This trend, coupled with high divorce rates, means that…
roughly a third of American children live apart from their fathers.
In an essay for the Institute for Family Studies last December,
called ‘Even for Rich Kids, Marriage Matters,’
University of Virginia sociologist W. Bradford Wilcox reported that
children in high-income households who experienced family breakups
don't fare as well emotionally, psychologically, educationally or, in the end,
economically as their two-parent-family peers.
Abuse, behavioral problems and psychological issues of all kinds,
such as developmental behavior problems or concentration issues,
are less common for children of married couples
than for cohabiting or single parents,
according to a 2003 Centers for Disease Control study of children's health.
The causal pathways are about as clear as those from smoking to cancer.”
(WSJ, April 20, 2014)

Now, I know there are some terrific single parents out there,
making heroic efforts to do the best for their children.
And not every child who grows up in a single-parent household
will fall short of their full potential.
But the statistics tell us that an intact home with a mom and a dad
provide the best possible chance of better outcomes.
And the divorced home, the single parent home face some very real challenges.
Given the reality that so many children grow up without Dad present,
and the reality that sometimes Dad being present is not all that positive an influence,
that can create some real issues for a person’s spirituality,
particularly given the fact that we in the Christian community so often speak of God as “Father.”
Those experiences of an absentee father or a father who is present but not-so-positive
are usually projected onto our thinking about God the Father.
People from such homes may end up thinking of God as an absentee father,
a non-factor in daily life,
or even a loveless, abusive father to be feared.
No, I am NOT going to suggest we jettison all talk of God as Father.
That is biblical language and imagery.
In the Old Testament God is known as the Father of the nation of Israel.
In the New Testament Jesus speaks of God… and TO God as “Abba, Father.” (Mk.14:36)
Not just the formal sounding “Father,”
but the more intimate address of a child to “Abba, Dad.”
And we are told that WE can address God as “Abba, Father.” (Ro.8:15; Ga.4:6)
It is rich and meaningful language.
And, in the long run, that language can help someone
transform their understanding of what a dad ought to be.
We need that language to understand God the way Jesus understood God.
What I DO want to suggest is that we could
pay a bit more attention to some other biblical language about God,
language with which many Christians are not so familiar.
In the Bible, Old Testament and New,
there is language about God that suggests God loves us with a mother’s love.
No, God is nowhere referred to as “God the Mother.”
But there are some pictures of God’s love as like a mother’s love.
Let’s take a look at some scripture texts that might give us something to ponder on this Mother’s Day.

On page one of the Bible we read these words,
“The Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.” (Ge.1:1-2)
The word translated “hovering” is often used to describe a mother hen brooding over her chicks.
The Spirit of God was brooding over the creation, tending, watching, keeping safe, protecting.
A little side note worth mentioning is:
Hebrew nouns are either masculine or feminine, just like in Spanish.
The Hebrew word for “spirit” is “ruach.”
It is a feminine noun.
The ruach of God was brooding over the creation.
That’s not the only place God is described as a mother bird tending its young.
In describing God’s relationship with his people Israel, Moses said,
“He shielded him and cared for him;
like an eagle that stirs up its nest and hovers over its young,
that spreads it wings to catch them and carries them on its pinions.” (Dt.32:10-11)
Just before they enter the promised land, Moses reminds them of all the mother bird has done for its young.
God treasured and watched over the people, “the apple of his eye,”
setting them free from slavery in Egypt,
blocking the Egyptian army so they could not attack the runaways,
parting the sea for them to cross,
guiding them through the wilderness for 40 years,
providing food when they were hungry, manna and quail,
even quenching their thirst with water from a rock,
and brought them to their promised land.
Like a mother eagle caring for her young.

In the New Testament, as Jesus is looking over the city of Jerusalem,
knowing there he will be betrayed, rejected, arrested, tortured and killed,
he said,
“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you!
How often would I have gathered your children together
as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!” (Mt.23:37)
He wanted so much for them to come to him,
to know his love, to receive the blessing and salvation he offered.
But they would not.
Love like that of a mother hen tending her chicks.
Even though sometimes that love is not well-received nor returned.
Mother hen doesn’t quit.

The Bible and early Christian tradition also points to another aspect of
God’s love as being like that of a mother for her children.
That is in the process of giving birth.
The most well-known use of this imagery is found in John 3,
when Jesus is talking with a man named Nicodemus.

**JOHN 3:1-8**

Born again, born of the Spirit.
When someone gives birth, is that person a mom or a dad?
Mothers give birth, right?
Dads may think they’re quite heroic because they were in the labor-delivery room,
but moms will let you know who did the real work of birthing.
Jesus says, “You must be born… born… of the Spirit.”
The Holy Spirit gives birth, new birth, second birth to those who put their trust in Jesus.
There’s that phrase “born of water and the Spirit.”
Most people have thought that referred to being water baptized and Spirit baptized.
But read in context it is something very different.
There are three phrases in succession:
“born of water and the Spirit,”
“born of flesh and the Spirit,”
and “born again, or born from above”.
Jesus is not saying three different things.
This is an ancient literary technique we usually see in poetry today,
to say the same thing in two or three different ways.
So “born of water and the Spirit” means the same thing as
“born of flesh and the Spirit” and “born again.”
“Born of water” means “born of flesh.”
When labor is under way and the baby is soon to be born,
one of the things that happens is the bag of waters breaks.
Born of water means physical birth.

In the second generation of the church,
theologians wrote that coming up out of the waters of baptism being like
the breaking of the bag of waters for our being born again.
As followers of Christ we are born of the Spirit.
Born of the Spirit.
The Holy Spirit plays the role of mother in birthing us.

Around the middle of the second century someone wrote a book not included in our Bible called the Gospel of the Hebrews.
In it Jesus refers to “my mother, the Holy Spirit.”
Again, this is not a book in our Bible.
It does not have any divine or apostolic authority attributed to it.
But it is fascinating to see some early Christians saw value in this image of the Holy Spirit in this motherly role of being the mother of Jesus, and so apparently having had a role in birthing him.

Sometime in the second century there was a baptismal creed used in the church in Rome that later served as the framework for what we now have as the Apostles’ Creed. The ancient Roman creed started with,
“I believe in God the Father almighty,
And in Christ Jesus, his only Son, our Lord
Who was born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary.”
Notice, “born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary.”
Almost as if there was his physical mother and then the Holy Spirit functioning as a spiritual mother.

Again, I’m not suggesting we take up talking about “God the Mother.”
But we can certainly be reminded that God is the author of our physical life and our spiritual life, our first birth and our being born again.
It’s a motherly love.
God is the one who brought you into this world and into his family.

It is all a gift, a gift of love, from God.

I wonder if we’ve neglected these motherly images of God’s love because we don’t fully value the work of a mother.
We tend to measure the value of almost everything by dollars and cents.
The more valuable person, the more valuable occupation, is the one that gets paid the most.
Which means the role of Mom is near the bottom of the ladder in many people’s minds.
That is just wrong.

Dr. Tony Campolo is a well-known and highly-respected, Christian speaker.
For many years, Campolo spent much of his time traveling around the world on speaking tours.
Meanwhile, his wife, Peggy, chose to stay home and give herself and all that she has to the raising of their two children.

On those rare occasions when Peggy did travel with Tony, she found herself engaged in conversations with some of the most accomplished, impressive, sophisticated people in the world.
After one such trip, Peggy told Tony that sometimes as she visited with these powerful people, she found herself feeling intimidated, sometimes even questioning her own self-worth.
Tony said to her: "Well, honey, why don't you come up with a way to describe what you do that will let them know that you strongly value what you do, and that you feel that it is dramatically urgent and important."

Well, not long after that, Tony and Peggy Campolo were at a party when a woman said to Peggy in a rather condescending tone, "Well, my dear, what do you do?"
Peggy Campolo said, "I am nurturing two Homo Sapiens into the dominant values of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, in order that they might become instruments for the transformation of the social order into the kind of eschatological utopia God envisioned.
from the beginning of time."

And the other woman said:
"O, my, I'm just a lawyer."

There are a lot of important jobs in the world today
but not one of them is more important than the job of being a mother.

Think of the things your mom did for you when you were young.
Think of what she went through to give birth to you.
Her body inhabited by someone else.
The movie *Alien* comes to mind.
Her body changed forever.
The pressure and pain and work of child birth.

Feeding you and feeding you and feeding you.
As a baby it was in the dark hours of the night,
the wee hours of the morning, and several times through the day.
And then when you hit the teenage years,
it seems like the same thing all over again!

When you were a babe in the crib,
peaking into your room to make sure you were breathing.
Because you slept through the night for the first time ever.

How much was money spent on you over the years?
Countless dollars, and a delayed retirement.

How many times did she stay on your case to
pick up your room, do your chores, fulfill your responsibilities?
It would have been easier to do it herself,
but she knew you would never learn responsibility that way.

How much time given to looking over homework,
going to student concerts and sporting events, the PTA, and booster organizations.

How many hours of worry when you got your driver’s license,
when you were out on a date,
and when she didn’t know where you were?

How many times did she bite her lip,
when she really wanted to tell you that you were making a stupid choice,
but she held back because she knew you’d learn more by making that choice?

How many times did you disobey, rebel, say hateful things,
and she kept loving you?

How deeply did her heart break when you failed at something,
when you went through divorce,
when you moved out of state?

How big is her smile when you go see her?
How happy is her voice when you call her?

Remember and give thanks for all your mom did for you.
All she does for you.
And remember that, as much as your mom did,
God has done so much more, and is continuing to do so to this very day.
So give thanks to God… for all the many expressions of love to you, his son or daughter.