Book 5

Sunday May 11, 1975

"ANGELS AND MOTHERS" I Kings 3:16-28, Hebrews 13:1-4

The other day a minister who no longer has a parish said to me, "I'm glad I don't have to preach a Mother's Day sermon. It's a difficult thing to do without being over-sentimental and yet have something fresh to say." He was correct in his observation. And maybe in the past we have sometimes been too sentimental about motherhood in and of itself and it can get us into trouble.

One minister's wife recently told of the trouble her husband got into one Mother's Day when he stepped forward during the announcements, holding a small carnation and announced that he wanted to honor the oldest mother present. Complete silence. Finally a voice from one of the back pews suggested, "Mary Helen." But there was a quick reply from Mary Helen as she said, "You know, Clara, you are as old as I am." Eventually the flower was pinned on a younger woman so the service could proceed.

Maybe part of our problem with such observances as Mother's Day and Father's Day is that we sometimes make the mistake of assuming that just because someone is a mother or a father, this automatically confers some special merit on a person.

A man I know who is the father of five children told me that when people meet him for the first time and ask about his family and then discover that he and his wife have five children, they often emit little murmers of admiration and respect as if he has done something notable.

He said to me, "I'm pleased and proud to have these children, but there was nothing especially meritorious about their conception. Their existence does not testify to my virility, or even to any exceptional fertility, and certainly is no evidence that I am suited for parenthood."

He went on to note that anybody with the nominal equipment can have children; it is no great achievement in and of itself. And parents with four children are not twice as good or twice as loving or twice as intelligent as parents with only two children. True they have more experience, but as Bismarck said of his donkey, "He has been through nine campaigns with me and knows no more than he did after the first."

So the important thing about being a parent or a mother is to begin to recognize the quality of parenthood that is more essential than the quantity. And that's what makes our text for today so appropiate.

As you know this story is about King Solomon's wisdom in dealing with two women, each of whom claimed to be the mother of the child they were quarreling over. Certainly this story cannot be called unduly sentimental. In the story, one mother in her carelessness has caused the death of her new-born baby and then she tried to steal another woman's baby.

So first of all, the story makes clear that not all mothers are angels. Or to put it another way, the fact of becoming a mother or a parent does not automatically give a person morality, goodness and all the other things we often associate with being an "angel."

One commentator put it this way, "If Solomon and women's liberation can conspire to free women from the burden of automatic angelhood that reputedly descends upon them as soon as they are wheeled triumphantly out of the delivery room, they will be liberated indeed. So will men! And little children! Neither before nor after attaining motherhood are women automatically angels by virtue of their sex or some marvel of spiritual obstetrics. They are persons and wish to be treated as such." We are not saying that motherhood is not a high calling. It is! But just the fact of having a baby does not mean we have all the qualities of being a good parent, become an angel. Not all mothers are angels!

The key then is not to put mothers on a pedestal, but to see them as human beings who have a difficult job along with other parents in bringing up children.

Secondly, if it's true that not all mothers are angels, it is also true that not all angels are mothers. In fact, not all angels are even female. So far as the Bible is concerned, I can't think of a single angel who is a woman. However, those of us who think about angels at all in our time, generally think of them as being female in form and description. But the Biblical angels all have masculine names--Gabriel, Michael, and Raphael. However that's probably because in the Bible, the masculine form is most often used.

But, the important thing is that in the Bible, angels regardless of their sex, are not necessarily beautiful, good or innocent; most of all they are understood as being messengers of God. And that's the kind of angels we can become!

This truth is certainly made evident in the story about Solomon and the two women. Neither of the women were virtuous or innocent. Yet one comes close to being an angel. These two women, neither of them married, each have a baby within three days of each other. As we noted earlier, one of the babies dies because of her mother's carelessness. So this woman in the middle of the night switched the babies. She laid her dead child beside the other woman and took the live baby as her own. However in the morning the woman whose baby had not really died, noticed the trade and these two mothers then in their dispute came to Solomon for justice.

The story reaches a climax when Solomon says, "Bring me a sword." A sword is brought and the king gives the order: "Cut the living child in two and give half to one and half to the other. At this moment the woman who is the right mother, moved with love for her child, cries out to the king, "O my lord, give her the living child. Whatever you do, don't kill it."

Now the King knows this is the real mother speaking. And the point for us is that a person who is neither good nor innocent is moved by love for her child and is thus a messenger of God, an angel in the best sense of the word. Divine wisdom was disclosed through the test of love.

Hopefully, qualities like love and self-sacrifice do not belong exclusively to some mothers or to women, but are available to all kinds of people. In other words, all angels are not mothers. Most of us have experienced such angel-like qualities from many kinds of persons in addition to our mothers. But maybe in most societies and cultures we recognize love in the intense feeling that a mother has for her child because we all have had mothers.

However, a story like this one, not only honors this kind of love which a mother had for her child, but shows us in addition that we are all capable of this kind of love even though in our personal lives we may not be good or innocent and we are capable of this kind of love no matter what our sex or whether we are mothers or fathers.

To be this kind of angel is a vocation to which we can all aspire whether or not we are a mother or a father.

The Biblical sexism that makes all angels male and the contemporary fiction that makes all angels female are both a dis-service to God who in Jesus Christ transcends every such distinction.

~~However~~ So, the Bible, using a woman's love as in this story as a model, is also telling us that if we become loving persons in the same way, we will be like angels, and furthermore in our loving may be entertaining angels without being aware of it.

There is another angel-like quality that is often present in mothers and in others around us as well.

In the Bible, angels appear in unique places and often with unusual messages. Luke, for example, tells us that while Jesus prayed before his trial and crucifixion, there appeared to him an angel from heaven strengthening him. An angel announces the birth of both Jesus and John the Baptist. And according to the Gospel writers, angels rolled away the stone from the tomb at the resurrection of Jesus.

At other times in the Bible, angels appear in disguise. In one Old Testament story, Abraham is seated by the entrance of his tent when three men pass by. He ran out to greet them and he welcomed them into his home. Abraham didn't know that he was entertaining angels in disguise. He simply invited them in because they needed a place to stay. He was that kind of person. Lot, his nephew on the other hand would only invite persons to stay in his home if he was sure they were angels. Abraham, however lived by the conviction that hospitality to people was equal to receiving God.

Later in the New Testament, in the Book of Hebrews, this incident is recalled as the writer reminds us, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares." It's a way of saying that the way we treat people is the way we treat God.

But back to angels and angel-like qualities which are available not only to mothers but to all of us. Did anyone ever tell you that you had the voice of an angel? Probably not. Yet so often we hear the expression, "She

has the voice of an angel." But what does an angel sound like? Did your mother have the voice of an angel? Well, the voice of an angel, research shows, sounds remarkably like a person saying, "Hurry up!"

How do I know this? Because that's what the angels often seem to be saying in the Bible when they talk to persons. An angel visits Peter in Jail and says, "Rise quickly." An angel says to Elijah, "Arise and eat." An angels says to Gideon, "Arise and go in this your might." An angel appears to Joseph in a dream and says, "Go quickly." An angel appears to Philip in the Book of Acts and says, "Arise and go."

Now we know another reason why many mothers have angel-like qualities. They are often the ones who have said to us, "Hurry up! Get up, it's time to get going!"

So there you have it, angels and mothers. On this Sunday when we honor mothers, what we want to honor even more is the example of one mother's love such as that revealed in the story of the two women and Solomon, for it is to that kind of love that our faith calls us whether we be women or men, or mothers or fathers or single, or divorced or childless. Because not all mothers are automatically angels, nor are fathers, and not all the angels that strengthen us from time to time are mothers. But many mothers are angels, and more than that each one of us can be an angel, a messenger of God, to some persons from time to time whether we are a mother or not. Amen.