Book 9

Sunday May 11, 1980

"MOTHER = CARING PERSON" Matthew 12:46-50, John 19:25-27

There is not much written about mothers in the Bible, but these two brief incidents from the New Testament which were just read give us glimpses of the relationship between Jesus and his mother Mary.

This morning let's look at each one of them and see what they have to say to us about mothers and how caring which motherhood symbolizes is to be a part of all of us.

In the first story from the Gospel of Matthew, the mother and brothers of Jesus have come to where Jesus was teaching and send a message through the crowd that they would like to speak with him. We are not told what's on their mind, but a number of Biblical scholars have suggested that the friends of Jesus and perhaps his family also, thought him to be deranged. In fact in the Gospel of Mark, we are told quite plainly that his friends thought him to be "beside himself," that is, out of his mind, crazy. His enemies at the same time accused him of being possessed by evil spirits and of being in league with the devil himself. Undoubtedly his mother worried about him and was puzzled by him as well. According to the Gospel of John, his mother and brothers did not understand him.

So we can surmise that Mary brought her other sons with her and hoped to persuade Jesus to come back home for a time. She knew that in addition to gaining followers, he was also picking up enemies. She could sense the opposition that was growing against her son, and she could also sense the danger. In her caring she wanted to protect him as only she knew how.

No doubt Jesus knew of his mother's fears and worries concerning him. At the same time he also knew that it would not help his mother nor would it be of help in his ministry if he went back home with her. He appreciated her caring about him, but also wanted to show he could reject her request and yet not reject her care. Thus he said to those around him, and to the man who brought the message from his mother and brothers, "Who is my mother and who are my brothers?" And stretching out his hand toward 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."

Jesus was saying that if one is going to be a mother in the right sense of that word, that means being a caring, loving person; but more than that, we are all to practice the kind of caring we see in mothers for their children; the kind of caring that the mother of Jesus possessed.

In addition, he was saying that we are to be caring persons regardless of whether or not we are biological mothers. To do the will of God is to be a caring individual. And when we are caring persons, then we see and treat each other as members of one family. Then we are like mothers and sisters and brothers to each other and in so doing we also become mothers and sisters and brothers of Christ.

That Jesus himself was a caring person and cared especially for his mother is shown in the second story we read this morning from the Gospel of John. During his dying moments on the cross and in the midst of his agony, he shows compassionate and tender care for his mother and also helped her to see that she was to care for others as well as for him. He said to his mother from the cross, "Woman, behold your son." In other words, care for this man as much as you have cared for me. He needs you now more than ever. At the same time, he also asked John to care for his mother. He said to John, "Behold, your mother."

Again, the main point in this brief incident is the same as in the story from the Gospel of Matthew. We are to be loving caring people who look after each other in the same manner as mothers care for their children and children care for their parents. And this caring is not to be limited only to our immediate family situation, but is to be the same for all human beings. God's family is world-wide.

1. So the first point to be made on this Mother's Day 1980, is that to be a mother in the best sense of that word is to be a loving, caring individual.

2. And this means secondly, that as Christians all of us, male and female, are to have the attributes of motherhood. God is a mother as well as a father. There are many Biblical images which describe God as a mother.

To be more specific, this means that no matter who we are, we do not escape the responsibility of being a mother

because we have no children, or because we happen to be a male human being or because our children have grown up and left home.

More and more in our time we hear of people, who though married, say that they have decided not to have children of their own. I'm sure that each couple making that kind of decision have their own special reasons. There are also others who have children of their own to seem to want to push the children out of their lives and to repudiate contact with all children.

Perhaps some people want to avoid having children and avoid contact with children because children are symbols of the future and they fear the future. Some even feel that their style of life is lived at the expense of the future and they do not want reminders of the future around them.

Now in this sermon, I'm not urging that all couples have children, but I am suggesting that our Christian faith teaches that we do not escape the responsibility of motherhood by not having children. To do the will of God is to be a mother as well as a sister or brother or father.

Couples or single persons do not have to have children of their own in order to preserve their link with the future. But we all do need to see ourselves as mothers, that is, we need as adults to be in some sort of relationship with children. Again, I emphasize that people need not give birth to children to be in touch with them.

There are children of our friends and neighbors who need our care and concern. There are many children in institutions who need contact with loving adults. And there are children being born who desperately need other caring adults to be in touch with them.

The grimmest statistics of 1979, have nothing to do with inflation or even the cost of the arms race. Nothing about the past year deserved greater concern and scrutiny than the fact that almost a million babies were born to unwed women. Equally startling and disturbing is a statistic showing that about 600,000 teenagers become mothers each year. Of these, more than 10,000 are 14 years of age or younger. The problem is compounded when many of the unwed mothers, especially the teenagers, go on to have additional children.

Inevitably, the immediate question raised by these developments concerns the economic cost, and it is staggering. But the economic cost, catastrophic though it is, may actually be the minor part of the problem. Far more serious is the social, moral and psychological impact on life in this country. What happens to a nation when the family ceases to exist as the central and stabilizing force of society?

Thus in addition to preventing as many teen-age pregnancies as possible and particularly in the case of unwed mothers, all of us need to help out in the mothering of these children.

In addition to this problem there are numerous volunteer programs in Lincoln, where we can be mothers to children. In our own congregation, we need adults particularly who will be teachers in our church school in the fall and winter of next year. The primary pre-requisite for being a church school teacher is to be a loving, caring person.

There are also ways we can be of help to families where there has been child abuse. That often happens when the father and mother are bearing great burdens and feeling a lot of anxiety that finds expression against the child. It is less likely to happen when there are other loving caring adults who help relieve the pressures. All children need contact with a wide range of caring adults.

In fact, in recent years, psychobiologists have started assembling the pieces in a vast jigsaw puzzle whose solution may finally result in an understanding and reduction of violence in different cultures. Anthropologists are fond of pointing out that not every culture is violent. Some, in fact, are surpisingly non-violent. The key question is, of course, what accounts for the differences?

One intriguing association that emerges from cross-cultural studies relates early infant-care practices to the later development of violence. With few exceptions, societies which provide infants with a great deal of physical affection and bodily contact produce relatively nonviolent adults. In societies where infants are touched, held, carried, rocked, and loved by a number of persons, the incidence of violence is much less than in societies where infant care is restricted to merely feeding and changing.

It's amazing what caring people can do, even when the child is older.

Take the true story of Rebecca Holmes. Becky is one of those children who greatest offense was being born. She was discovered by the child-abuse department of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department. When the police entered the home, they found a comfortable living room filled with greenery. One wall was covered with family snapshots showing the parents with two children, Alice 13, and Danny, 9. But not shown in the photographs was the child the officers had come to see, 8 year old Rebecca.

When the officers asked to see Rebecca, they were told by the mother that she was sleeping, but they insisted on seeing her anyway. The woman reluctantly led them down a short hall. When the door of the last bedroom was opened, the smell from inside just about bowled the officers over. They had to hold their breath, it was so overpowering.

Asked where the child was, the mother pointed to a screen set up near the closet. Moving it aside, Seargeant Travis beheld a grotesque sight. Asleep on a green, vinyl-covered cot was the little girl. She was not lying down. She was not covered. She slept sitting up, unsupported, her legs outstretched stiffly before her. Here was a tiny, tiny, tiny, tiny little girl. As the officer picked her up, the child's overflowing diaper slid to her ankles, revealing a crimson rash so bad that the girl's skin was peeling. There were other classic signs of child abuse. The child looked at her mother and resumed her original submissive pose, eyes closed, hands clasped on her thighs, quiet, sore and uncomplaining.

When the officers found Becky on April 18, 1978, she weighed 24 pounds and stood 32 inches high and was 8 years old. She was unable to walk and could speak only a handful of words.

Today, as a result of attending a special school and being put in a foster home of loving, caring parents, Rebecca has begun to assert herself. She has become more sociable and self-reliant. She has learned to laugh and to read, but she will never recover completely from the abuse and neglect of her first eight years. But loving care is working miracles.

There are children all around us who need our love and care, and there are adults who need it too. God calls us to be mothers, to be caring persons.

It is not enough that we look at one another and say, "we are brothers and sisters. Sometimes that is too easy. That is a way of saying we come from a common past, that we have a shared origin and a certain similarity that binds us one to another. But we are also to look at one another and at the world around us and say, "together we will be parents, we will be mothers who care--" because in being a mother we commit ourselves to the future as well as to the past and the present. Amen.