Sunday, May 9, 1982
IN DEFENSE OF STEPMOTHERS
John 19:26-27, I John 4:7-12

Not too long ago, a retired minister 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 overly sentimental and yet have something fresh to say.” He was correct in his observation. Maybe part of our problem with such observances as “Mother’s Day” and “Father’s Day,” is that we make the mistake of assuming that just because someone is a mother or father, this automatically confers some special merit on a person.

A woman I know who is the mother of eight children told me that when people meet her for the first time and ask about her family and then discover that she and her husband have eight children, they often emit little murmurs of admiration and respect as if she had done something notable.

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

She 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.”

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 what we sometimes forget is that there are many kinds of mothers and fathers in the world: biological mothers, mothers-in-law, stepmothers, foster-mothers, grandmothers, great-grandmothers, aunts who act as mothers and friends who become our mothers from time to time when needed. All of these except for biological mothers can be called stepmothers.

Parents who adopt children are legally stepmothers. There are widows and widowers who remarry, each bringing children with them, and they are stepparents. There are divorced parents who remarry, and they become stepparents.

I have a stepmother. About thirteen years ago, my biological mother died, and several years later, my father ren1arried. He married a widow who had two children from her first marriage, so her children gained a stepfather, and we gained a stepmother. The marriage has been good for both of them and for all the children as well.

But stepmothers have not always had a very good image. Even the smallest child has been indoctrinated through fairy tales depicting the wickedness and cruelty of stepmothers. The stories have been repeated so often that adults as well as children actually believe them.

Here’s a story someone recently told me. “When I was a little boy, I had a friend whose mother had died. I’ll never forget the day his father returned home from his honeymoon with his new

wife, the boy's stepmother. Three of us sat out behind the garage, dragging out all the stories we'd heard about stepmothers. We kept telling the poor kid worse and worse stories until we were all terrified.

By the time the father arrived, we genuinely expected to see an ogre. When we heard his father calling him, we hid in the bushes. The father called and called, and finally the kid had to respond — was he scared! and go in. We tried to look through the windows to see what she looked like and what she was going to do to him.

She turned out to be a wonderful mother. She did far more for us than the other mothers on the block. But it took us the longest time to believe that underneath all that niceness something awful wasn't lurking. I can remember my mother saying, 'Imagine what this woman has taken on. Give her a break.' Still, it was months before we'd dare eat the cookies that she baked for us."

Why have stepmother had such a bad image? Much of it comes from fairy tales. Simple beautiful stories that have captivated parents and children. Fairy tales are enveloping experiences. Because of their extremes, they're emotionally satisfying. It's black and white all the way, the pure and the soiled, the wicked woman and the unspoiled child. The story is told from the child's point of view, and the child represents all humankind in its most innocent and vulnerable condition. Rewards and punishments parallel heaven and hell. Being eaten or locked up or left in the woods, takes the place of hell. Heaven is having your father all to yourself or marrying a prince or a princess. All good clean fun except for the stepmother. She gets it in the end, but first she's shown to richly deserve the worst.

Remember the story of Snow White and her stepmother? The stepmother was a queen and had always been the most beautiful of all. Snow White, however, had been growing more beautiful with every passing day. In the middle of a harsh winter the queen consulted her mirror; it told her that Snow White was now fairer than she. The stepmother could bear it no longer and she had Snow White taken out to the woods to be put to death.

It was also out into the woods that a stepmother sent Hansel and Gretel. Without enough food to go around, something had to give. The stepmother thought it ought to be her husband's children. At first, he couldn't go along with this, but the stepmother gave him no peace until he consented.

The most popular fairy tale is Cinderella. Cinderella has become a synonym for a deprived stepchild. Not sent away like Hansel and Gretel and Snow White, Cinderella is instead kept at home in dreadful old clothes doing all the dirty work. Her stepfamily, her father, stepmother, and stepsisters, dress up in fancy clothes and go off to the ball where there is to be a handsome prince and leave her home alone. Only her fairy godmother saves her.

There are other step fairy tales even more extreme. In the "Juniper Tree" the stepmother cuts the stepchild into pieces and makes a soup that she serves the father who eats it.

Note particularly that the father in the fairy tales is never held culpable for his action or inaction. It is all the stepmother's doing; she alone bears all the blame. As the most powerful person in these stories, she can be overcome only by supernatural forces. The villain is always the stepmother. Stepmothers have gotten a raw deal.

The term stepmother is not used in the Bible, but there were many stepmothers and fathers in those times too. Remember Moses was raised by a stepmother who happened to be the daughter of Pharoah. We also know that in Biblical times many mothers died young and left children to be raised by others. Fathers often married again, or else the grandmother or aunt or some other female family member took over becoming in effect a stepmother.

When Jesus was dying on the cross, he made his mother a stepmother by assigning his beloved disciple John to his mother as a son.

The point is that far from being a villain, in real life stepmothers have played a very important role in our families and in our society. And nothing is more difficult than stepping into a readymade family as a new parent.

Maybe one reason stepmothers have been treated so badly in literature and in tradition is because they are expected to have instant love for the children they have inherited. Simply because two people marry and there are already children that are brought into the marriage does not mean that love will automatically spring into being. Rather love needs to be a growing process and it often takes more time than we expect it to take.

In other words, the mythology of “mother love” can be a trap for the stepmother. She is expected to love her new children imn1ediately.

Love cannot be forced, but it can and does happen in stepfamilies. In the case of a first marriage where two people have children together, love is prepared for. The parents eagerly await the child. In the case of the stepfamily, the merger of the children is immediate. Many individuals are involved. There is an abrupt change in family structure, and it takes time for individuals to get used to each other, to accept each other and to learn to love each other.

This is simply the way most relationships come into being between and among human beings. Lasting relationships take time.

What then can we learn from stepmothers?

1. First that one can be a loving and caring person whether or not one is a biological parent. All of us as Christians are to have the attributes of motherhood--that is we are to be loving, caring people in our relationships to others, both children and adults.

This means that no matter who we are, we do not escape the responsibility of being a parent simply because we have no children of our own or because our children have grown up and left home. We are all to be stepmothers and stepfathers to each other. Love is more than biology.

2. Secondly, we will not always be successful in our loving. Since love to be love is freely given and freely received, this means that love can also be rejected. Not everyone we reach out to in love will return that love. Jesus Christ at times reached out to people who then rejected him. This can happen to us not only in relationships of stepparents and stepchildren but can also happen in biological families.

3. Thirdly, the relationship of a stepmother or stepfather to stepchildren is a kind of parable of God’s relationship to us. In fact, St. Paul in the letter to the Galatians speaks of us as having received adoption by God, which makes God our stepparent.

God adopts all of us and loves us no matter what our condition or behavior. We cannot earn God’s love — it is freely given and is constantly available.

So, we are all stepchildren as well as being stepparents. In that spirit we can all celebrate Mother’s Day with a new understanding. Stepmothers are as real and as important as natural mothers. Amen.