Sunday, May 13, 1984
MOTHERS AND THE MOTHERHOOD OF GOD
Luke 13:10-13; Mark 3:31-35

In talking about God, we human beings frequently use metaphors. Thus, we say God is like a loving Father, or God is like a just King, or God is the ruler, or God is my shepherd, or God is my light and my salvation.

In the New Testament of the Bible, some of the same metaphors are used for Jesus. He is the good shepherd, the light of the world, the lamb of God, and the bread of life. It's difficult to talk meaningfully about God or Jesus without using metaphors. And that's all right as long as we remember we are using metaphors and do not elevate the metaphors into unchangeable doctrine.

Many of the Biblical metaphors used in relation to God are masculine because of the patriarchal culture in which the Bible was written. In fact, in the legal codes of the Old Testament, women are legally non-persons. These legal codes reflect the ancient social and cultural practices of the Near East, which included a thorough-going male dominated society, including polygamy, concubines, and slavery.

In these Hebrew legal codes, the woman's role was to build up her husband's house by having children. She was the property of her husband. Thus, for example, her adultery was a major crime because the husband's property was damaged. The unmarried woman convicted of fornication was likewise punished because she was damaged property and therefore not fit for marriage. In the case of the male, sexual infidelity was dealt with differently. It was not ranked as a crime in the same way.

Given this cultural bias, we can see why male metaphors were most often used for God. What is surprising, therefore, is the number of times God is referred to in feminine term and metaphors in the Old Testament. For example, in the prophet Hosea, God is compared to the Hebrew mother who teaches the child to walk, heals the child's wounds, and feeds the child.

In the traditions of the Exodus, God provides for those necessities which were always obtained through woman's work — food and water. In the prophet Nehemiah, God is a seamstress, just as in the book of Genesis, when God made garments to cover the naked Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Isaiah speaks of God as having birth pangs, and Isaiah also describes God as a mother comforting her children. At another place in the Old Testament, god's remembrance of Zion is compared to the love of a nursing mother and the work of a midwife.

In the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, such as the book of Proverbs, we find an elevated view of women. Here they are revealed as teacher-mothers with emphasis on their instructional roles in the family. As teachers, whom wise children will heed, women are ranked equally with men, and together they represent the parental teaching functions. Both women and men are to be honored and obeyed. In the ten commandments, we are instructed to honor father and mother.

And in the historical writings of the Old Testament, women are seen in terms of individual characters and biographies. We meet Deborah and Jezebel, Miriam, Ruth, Esther, and many more. In some of these historical writings, women have special roles in addition to those of wife and mother. There are recognized women prophets which shows that the gift of prophecy

is no respecter of sex. These women represent the recognition by Israel that god speaks through women and calls them to deliver revelations to god's people, as well as men.

In the New Testament, the actions of Jesus show that he crossed over the boundaries of sex, national origin, status, and cultural practices in order to minister to people — both men and women. For example, he broke traditional customs in order to speak with a Samaritan woman and to help her find meaning in life. He ignored customary barriers in permitting a woman of questionable character to anoint him with expensive ointment and praised her sign of devotion. In fact, Jesus broke with many customs and regulations which tended to dehumanize people.

In all four Gospels, Jesus is never reported as acting or speaking to women in a derogatory fashion. He always treated them as equals and as human beings who are loved by god. In other words, for Jesus, women were not just creatures who filled roles such as mother, wife, baby machine, nurse, housekeeper, cook, or sex object, but human beings capable of making important decisions and commitments.

There is a revealing story of Jesus healing a woman reported by the Gospel of Luke. It was read as part of our scripture reading earlier. "and there was a woman who had had a spirit of infirmity for eighteen years; she was bent over and could not fully straighten herself. And when Jesus saw her, he called her and said, 'Women, you are freed from your infirmity.' And he laid his hands on her and immediately she was made straight, and she praised God."

Luke does not tell us specifically why she is bent over, but he does say that she'd been that way for 18 years. That's a long time to be in pain and suffering.

Recently, I read an article in one of the journals I receive about this "bent-over woman." The article reported that in a bible study group of mostly women, the leader asked them, "What in your experience might cause a woman to be bent over for 18 years?"

"Her children," one woman said. "Eighteen years is the minimum sentence parenthood brings." Another spoke up and said, "Don't forget her husband; she was probably permanently bent over from picking up his dirty socks for 30 years."

Still another said that maybe she was tired of working like a slave for a minimum wage or even tired of working like a slave at home for no wages at all.

"Maybe she had a doctorate in economics," suggested another woman, and found that nobody listened when she talked about inflation and tax structure, but instead paid attention to some pompous man — even if he hadn't read a serious book on the subject for years."

"Or perhaps every time she held her head up and tried to be somebody, the people around her, both male and female, did all they could to deflate and diminish her again."

There are many "bent-over women" and many mothers are among them. It's an apt symbol. Seventy percent of households headed by women or mothers are poor. That causes them to be bent over. Women head 15 percent of all families, but 50 percent of poor families. Three out of five women earn less than $10,000 a year.

The point is that Jesus told this woman, and he tells all of us who are bent over, to stand up straight, and he enabled her and he enables us to do so.

So, while the Bible is primarily patriarchal, there are many grand exceptions. And as we read and study the Bible, we discover that the overall purpose of Biblical faith is not e perpetuation of patriarchy, but rather the blessing of women and men together in their full and equal co-humanity. There is no sexism in the love and blessing of God as proclaimed by the Christian faith.

Thus, it's all right to talk about the "fatherhood of God," as long as we remember we are using a metaphor, and it's all right to speak of the "motherhood of God," as long as we remember we are using a metaphor. In fact, it's helpful to use both motherhood and fatherhood in talking of god, for together they more fully describe God's relationship to us and our relationship to God and one another.

Now, since this is "Mother's Day," let's look more specifically this morning at how God is like a mother and then secondly how we are all to be like mothers, especially straightened-up mothers, whether we be male or female.

1. God is like a mother because God continually gives birth to life; god is continually creating and making things new. Meister Eckhart, a 14th century mystic, put it this way: "What does god do all day long? God gives birth. From all eternity God lies on a maternity bed giving birth."

We can all be mothers, whether or not we actually give birth to a child. All of us, male and female, have within us the potential to be creative. We even talk in our language, whether we are male or female, of "giving birth" to new ideas. Because of our inherent creativity as human beings, we are all called to develop the mother in ourselves, whether we are women or men, married, single, or celibate.

Rabbi Heschel put it this way: "No one is sterile. Every soul is pregnant with the seed of insight. It is vague and hidden. In some people the seed grows; in others it decays. Some give birth to life. Others miscarry it. Some know how to bear, to nurse, to rear an insight that comes into being. Others do not."

Jesus used the metaphor of mother, as well as brother and sister, to describe those who do the will of God. In the gospel lesson read earlier, Jesus is quoted as saying, "Whoever does the will of God is my brother, sister, and mother."

So, being a mother, as far as the Christian faith is concerned, is much more than just being a biological mother. We are call called to be creative human beings. We are all called to give birth to new insights, new ideas, just as God is continually giving birth like a mother.

2. Secondly, God is a caring, nurturing, loving God, like a caring, nurturing, loving mother, and we are all called to be the same. We are called to create loving, nurturing, caring communities. To put it another way, an emphasis on the "motherhood of God" speaks of compassion as a way of life.

Not only is god like a mother, but god is like a child, and God is like a brother and sister.

Earlier as part of the scripture lesson we read the story of Jesus' mother and brothers and sisters coming to talk with him, and he was in the midst of a crowd teaching. When he got the message that his family was waiting to see him, he used it as an illustration. "He asked, 'Who are my mother and my brothers and sisters?' And, looking around on those who sat about him,

he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.'"

Whenever we are compassionate, loving, caring human beings, we are then brothers and sisters and mothers of Christ. So, to give birth to compassion, to give birth to wisdom, to give birth to love, to give birth to justice, is to give birth to God. And in that sense, then, we are mothers of God.

So, spiritually speaking, motherhood is not confined to mothers! On this Mother’s Day, 1984, we need to liberate the mother in each one of us, and we need to see again the “mothering” side of God.

At the same time, we are then truly honoring all the mothers among us who have brought children into the world or who have been mothers to the children of others. We repay your love best if we pass it on and if we become mothers in our own way. The world certainly needs mothering, and it needs mothering by those who through the love of God have been able to stand straight and are no longer bent over. We celebrate today, therefore, mothers and the motherhood of God! Amen.