Sunday, May 12, 1985
THE MOTHERHOOD OF THE CHURCH
Romans 12:4-8; Matthew 12:46-50

There's A strange contradiction in the language of Christians. The church is frequently called the "Body of Christ," and at the same time it is usually spoken of in feminine terms feminine pronouns are used. The first verse of the hymn "The Church's one foundation" begins "The Church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord, she is the new creation."

If the Church can be spoken of in feminine terms, I also believe we can take one step further and speak of the Church as a mother. It's A fitting metaphor for the following reasons.

First, to be a mother involves pregnancy, and there are things about pregnancy which speak to us as a Church and as Christians whether we are mothers or fathers, or have no children. To be pregnant is to be an active partner in creation and the development of new life.

It is significant that at one point in his ministry, Jesus used the metaphor of birth which results from pregnancy as a way of describing what it is to become a follower of Christ´s way. He told an individual that he must be born anew! Just as a mother helps develop new life, so the Church as the body of Christ is to bring new life to people.

In addition there is a passage in the prophet Isaiah that uses pregnancy as a symbol for the active love of God toward her people and I use the pronoun "Her" because in this instance the passage describes God, in feminine imagery.

"Hearken to me, O house of Jacob, all the remnants of the house of Israel, who have been borne by me from your birth, carried from the womb. Even to your old age, I shall carry you. I have made, and I will bear. I will carry and will save."

How intimate is this relationship between God and Us!

So also the Church is to be like a mother, a creative, life — giving, nurturing, caring institution. Like a mother carries a child in pregnancy, so the Church carries us, not only when we are babies or children, but whenever we need to be carried through illness, grief, or other Crises.

One night a man had a dream. He dreamed he was walking along the beach with God, across the sky flashed scenes from his life. In each scene he noticed two sets of footprints in the sand, one belonging to him and the other to God. When the last scene flashed before him, he looked back at the footprints and noticed that many times along the path there was only one set of footprints in the sand. He also noticed that this happened during the lowest and saddest times of his life. This bothered him, so he questioned God. "You said that once I decided to follow you, you would walk with me all the way, but I noticed that during the most troublesome times of my life there was only one set of footprints. I don´t understand why, when I needed you the most, You deserted me." God replied, "My precious child, I would never desert you. During your times of trial and suffering, when you saw only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you."

Second, to be a mother involves sacrifice, suffering, and joy. For the Church to be. True to its mission as the body of Christ involves sacrifice, suffering, and joy.

As someone wrote: “The pain of childbearing is two — fold. There are two kinds of suffering which attend the physical bearing of children into this world. The first is that a woman must make space in her body for a baby, and doing that she sacrifices a host of personal goods: Her shape, hormonal equilibrium, energy, her freedom to sleep in any position, beauty (so she sometimes feels), and with these, her self-esteem.”

And the wonder is that such suffering also contains the sudden spasms of joy, and that both should come together. The woman who groans is the same who laughs to feel life within her.

The second suffering of bearing children is the opposite of the first. Having made space for the baby, she must now empty the space. It does not matter how much she has invested in carrying the child. At the end of nine months, she’s asked to give it up, to separate herself from it, to deliver it whole and squalling into existence. “Get out of me”, her muscles say, her womb, her leaning forward, her very self says to the infant: “Get out of me, in order to be.”

Any reasonable person might think that once. Through this curious drama of love were enough. Once to labor at making room, once to labor at emptying it. But the mother is asked to do it all over again.

For now the child is not in her body, but in her life. Again, she sacrifices many personal goods to give the child the space to grow in. Her energies are divided. Her sense of accomplishment is shattered every time she does the laundry without gratitude, because it is endlessly taken for granted. (“Hey mom! How come my pants aren’t ready yet? Don’t I have any clean socks?”)

My mother would go to bed early and tired. And so she made space for her seven children. Again in this suffering and in this sacrifice there are spasms of joy. She laughs to see her child´s emerging life, her child’s growing maturity.

And this too brings more suffering, sacrifice and joy. At the child’s maturity she must birth the child, not out of her body, but out of her house and into the world, an independent and interdependent being.

It doesn’t matter how much she invested in raising her or him. By stages now, she labors to let the young person go. By degrees she loosens the reins, knowing full well the dangers to which she sends her child, yet fearing the greater danger of clinging to the child too closely forever, and now her hurt is the hurt that the child will encounter on his or her own.

A young man wrote about his memories “On my first day in the first grade, I panicked and cried and raced back to the car where my mother was. “Mama, take me home!” I thought she would be happy to see me and to discover my undiminished need for her presence, her love and her protection. Sat smiling in the front seat and heard the car´s ignition even before she turned the key. She never turned the key. Only now do I understand her own tears as she took my hand and walked me back into the school again.”

So being a mother is more than being pregnant and helping to bring new life into the world, it is to be a caring, nurturing individual. And it is also to nurture children and young people so that they become responsible, caring individuals on their own.

So too the Church is to do more than just help people to be born anew but also to help them grow and mature as Christians so that they in turn become caring, nurturing people. And as Christians, male and female, we are all to become pregnant people in that while we often

speak of living in God, there is also the sense that we carry Christ within us. So St. Paul wrote, ”I live not with my own life, but with the life of Christ who lives in me.” Within you, Christ lives and grows. And from you, the love of Christ and Christ ways are born into the world.

I believe that Jesus himself saw the emerging. Church in his time as being like a mother, in the story read as part of our scripture lesson from the Gospel of Matthew, the mother and brothers and perhaps sisters of Jesus have come to where Jesus was teaching, and the family sends a message through the crowd that they would like to speak with him. We are not told what was on their mind, or why they wanted to see him.

Whatever the reason, Jesus took the occasion and used it to make a point in his teaching. He asked, “Who is my mother and who are my brothers and sisters?” And then stretched out his arms, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers and sisters! For whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”

It’s an amazing metaphor. “Whoever does the will of God, is the mother and brother and sister of Christ.” And what is the ultimate will of God, “To love God with your heart and soul and mind and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself.”

To be a mother involves pregnancy and giving birth to be a mother involves sacrifice, suffering and joy. The Church is to be a mother and we are to be mothers to each other.

So, on this Mother’s Day 1985, we salute the mothers among us, our mothers, our stepmothers, our grandmothers, our great grandmothers, those who have mothered us, be they neighbors, strangers, or relative’s females and males. And we also salute the Church as our mother, as this body of Christ carries us and gives us new birth and it helps us grow and mature so that Christ is born in us and lives in us. Amen.