Sunday, May 8, 1988
MOTHERS AND CHILDREN
Exodus 20:12; John 19:25-27; Matthew 18:2-6

When a child is born, a mother is born. “And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger because there was no place for them in the inn.” In that simple statement, we are told of the birth of Jesus and also of Mary becoming a mother for the first time.

When a child is born, a father is born too, of course. But a biological mother has had nine months to get used to what’s happening. She becomes what’s happening.

There is not a lot of material about mothers and motherhood in the Bible. In Biblical times, there was no special day set aside to remember and honor mothers — no “Mother’s Day” as we now have it.

Here’s a little bit of history that will interest you. The American version of Mother’s Day began in 1906 when Anna Jarvis of Philadelphia registered the idea with the U.S. Patent Office. The registration reads: “Second Sunday in May. Mother’s Day.”

Miss Jarvis’ mother, Anna Reese Jarvis, had died the previous year, and her daughter, Anna, was determined to honor her each year and all mothers throughout the country.

Anna Jarvis wasn’t the first person to propose a day to honor mothers. In fact, the custom had existed in some Western cultures for centuries. Julia Ward Howe, composer of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” is credited with originating the idea in this country. And Mary Towles Sasseen, a schoolteacher in Henderson, Kentucky, presented in 1887 a program honoring mothers that became an annual event locally.

But it was Anna Jarvis’ idea that caught on — entirely because of her relentless campaigning for it.

Anna Jarvis was born in Webster, West Virginia, on May 1, 1864, the daughter of a Methodist minister. Her mother taught classes at her father’s church in Grafton, West Virginia, before the family moved to Philadelphia in 1904. In that year, Congress authorized, but President Theodore Roosevelt did not issue, a proclamation designating the second Sunday in May as Mother’s Day.

Anna Jarvis was 40 years old when the family moved to Philadelphia, and she never married. Instead, she had cared for her blind older sister, Elsinore, known as Lilly. Their mother died in Philadelphia on May 9, 1905.

Although Anna Jarvis never became a biological mother, she gave motherly love and care to her blind sister all her life. And beginning in 1906, Anna devoted the rest of her life to Mother’s Day, working as hard to keep it pure as she had worked to establish it.

Her Patent Office registration in hand and her letter-writing blitz in full swing, Anna called some friends to her home on the second Sunday in May, 1908, and told them of her plan to celebrate Mother’s Day. She asked the advice of John Wanamaker, the Philadelphia merchant, who endorsed her idea and her campaign to make its observance national.

In 1910, Congress began receiving even more mail than usual from Anna Jarvis. She had walked past a post office on “Mother’s Day” and found that the flag wasn’t flying. She complained. When the Postmaster General informed her that he couldn’t have the flag flown on a Sunday, even in honor of American motherhood, without an Act of Congress and a Presidential proclamation, she descended on Capitol Hill to lobby for just that. It took her three sessions of Congress to accomplish.

On May 10, 1913, Congress adopted a resolution endorsing the observance of Mother’s Day by Congress and Federal Government departments. The next year’s Congress authorized the President to proclaim Mother’s Day nationally, and President Wilson issued the first annual proclamation on May 9, 1914.

Anna Jarvis spent the rest of her life fighting the commercialization of Mother’s Day. She showed up, uninvited, at florists’ meetings to berate them for “profiteering,” and more than once hotel detectives were asked to show her out. She attended the convention of the Associated Retail Confectioners of America and stood up, uninvited, and shouted, “I want to tell you that you are using a beautiful idea as a means of profiteering. As the founder of Mother’s Day, I demand that it cease.” The convention hastily adjourned.

As the years passed, Anna became more and more embittered because she thought Mother’s Day had become too commercialized. Then her blind sister died, and Anna lost her income property and went blind herself.

On a cold November day in 1944, Anna Jarvis entered Philadelphia General Hospital asking for treatment. She had no money, so friends placed her in a sanitarium in nearby West Chester, Pennsylvania. There, on November 24, 1948, at the age of 84, she died, alone, blind, and penniless.

But now let’s return to the subject of Jesus and His mother. Jesus was by no means overly sentimental on the subject. He said in one place that people who loved their mothers more than they loved Him were not worthy of Him (Matthew 10:37), indicating that duty comes first. And in another incident recorded in the gospels, when they told Jesus His mother was outside waiting while He spoke to some group or other, He said that His mother was anybody who did God’s will.

To His own mother, Jesus could be very abrupt. When she came to Him at the wedding in Cana to tell Him the wine had given out, He said, “O woman, what have you to do with me? My hour has not yet come,” meaning perhaps that she was to let Him alone, that at that early point in His ministry, He wasn’t ready to be known as a miracle worker.

Some of the last words He ever spoke were in her behalf, however. She was standing at the foot of the cross when He told her in effect that from then on, His disciple, John, would look after her. “Behold your son,” He said, indicating him to her.

According to the Bible, our mothers, like our fathers, are to be honored. But if Jesus is to be our guide, honoring them doesn’t mean either idealizing them or idolizing them. It means seeing them both for who they are and for who they are not. It means speaking the truth to them. It means the best way of repaying them for their love is to love God and our neighbor as faithfully and as selflessly as, at their best, our mothers have tried to love us.

I said in the beginning of this sermon that when a child is born, a mother is born. Now let's look at the other side of the equation — when someone becomes a mother, it means a child is born. This sermon is about mothers and children.

More and more in our society, we all have to be mothers of the children.

According to the latest statistics I could find, nearly 40 percent of all poor people in this country are children. Since 1979, children have fallen into poverty at the rate of 3,000 per day. Today there are 13 million children living in poverty in this country. Children and their families represent one-third of the homeless population.

1.9 million children are abused and neglected in this country.

No wonder Jesus said, as quoted by Matthew's Gospel: "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me; but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened round his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea."

It has been said that the final test of a society is what that society does to its children.

To be sure, we have been making progress overall in our society in relation to our treatment of children. In the not-too-distant past, parents who considered themselves Christian believed that children were by nature filled with evil, and there were parents who regularly beat their children to get the devil or sin out of them.

In a book published a few years ago entitled The Little Darlings: A History of Child-Rearing in America, the author, Mary Cable, cites a number of examples of child-rearing practices which we today would consider terrible. Dr. John Witherspoon, the influential 18th-century expert on children, had some simple advice on how to establish parental authority over 8-month-old infants—"once a day take something from them."

We are also told that every morning of his childhood in the same century, Josiah Quincy was taken into the cellar of his Boston house and plunged into a tub of cold spring water. That was mostly because John Locke, the British philosopher, whose advice on children guided thousands of American parents, thought cold water built good children. Locke also feared that children whose feet weren't used to cold water would get sick from occasional wet feet. His answer was to encourage frequent wet feet.

As in modern times, new fashions in parental panaceas breezed in and out of each generation. Aaron Burr warned his daughter that her "vile habit" of bad posture was bound to cause tuberculosis. A southern school teacher believed in beating each new student until he or she either fainted or vomited. As late as the 19th century, some parents regularly whipped nursing infants on the assumption that they were born depraved and were therefore thinking lies.

Family violence is not a new problem. It has been around for a long time, and the past was probably worse than the present. Laws against child labor, more emphasis on preventing child abuse in the home and in other places, and other similar social policies have helped in protecting children. However, there's still a lot to be done, and we as Christians are to act as loving 'mothers' on behalf of the children in this country and around the world. Mothers and children go together.

We have more and more single-parent families and more and more two-parent families where both mother and father are working outside the home — thus, quality daycare for children in such cases is a major issue facing our society.

Jesus took a child and put that child in the midst of them. Jesus took the children in His arms and blessed them.

On this Mother's Day, we honor first our mothers — those who have loved us and cared for us in the same way that God loves us and cares for us. And we also remember children — the children who are what make us mothers and fathers in the first place. We remember that we in the church especially are all to be mothers to the children in our society.

Love for God is inseparable from love for other human beings, especially those who need our care. And there are few human beings among us who are quite so vulnerable as children. Amen.