Sunday, May 14, 1989
WHAT JESUS LEARNED FROM HIS MOTHER
Mark 3:31-35; John 19:25-27

What Jesus learned from His mother — that's our theme for this Mother's Day. As we look at some of the things He learned from His mother, my hope is that it will prompt all of us to remember some of the things we learned from our mothers.

This morning on this Mother's Day, let's begin by looking first at Mary, the mother of Jesus. When you think of her, what images come into your mind? A sweet young innocent woman? A peasant girl? Or do you think of those statues of Mary that are seen in some churches or in religious bookstores?

Actually, the New Testament of the Bible doesn't tell us very much about Mary. She is not physically described, so we don't know how she looked, whether she was tall or short, thin or stout. We don't know anything about the family she grew up in, whether or not she had brothers and sisters, how old she was when Jesus was born, or how old she was when she died. After the death and resurrection accounts of Jesus in the New Testament, we hear almost nothing about her.

The Apostle Paul, who wrote most of the New Testament, doesn't even mention her name — he refers to her only indirectly. Here's his statement about her in his letter to the Galatians: "When the time had fully come, God sent the Son, born of woman, born under the law."

But there are lots of traditions about Mary that grew up alongside the New Testament. Most of them see her as a devout young peasant woman, probably sixteen or seventeen years old when Jesus was born. According to these traditions, her mother's name was Ann. Still, another tradition holds that her husband, Joseph, died before she did and that she had to raise the family as a single parent.

Even though the New Testament doesn't tell us all we would like to know about Mary, we have enough information so that Mary's story and her deep faith in God give us some clues to what Jesus learned from His mother.

According to Luke's account, when the Angel appeared to Mary and said, "Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you," and in effect told her that she had been chosen by God for a special purpose, she replied, and I paraphrase, "Wait a minute, I want to know more about what this means before I get too involved." It shows, of course, a lot of astuteness in Mary. She was not a passive character. No doubt she had learned through experience that there is no such thing as a free lunch. Or maybe she didn't want to get her expectations too high. Perhaps she wanted no disappointments; so no more expectations. The Angel brought her what was supposed to be good news, yet she had questions about it.

That is not unusual, though. Oftentimes, we too have questions about what's supposed to be good news for us. Someone says, "I've got a great opportunity for you." We hear it and we're likely to say, "Wait a minute, what's the catch?"

Too often, I believe, Mary has been described as a kind of passive instrument. But the gospel stories imply something different. We see in her a confident, questioning, decision-making human being. We see in Mary an active participant in the drama of God's redemption. She is a

genuine example of faith acted out in discipleship and response to God's word. She was willing to let God be born through her. She was a wise and loving mother. She was willing to let her soul magnify the Lord, as she later said.

Mothers and wisdom go together. Thus, it is no accident that in the Old Testament of the Bible, especially in a book like Proverbs, wisdom is frequently described in feminine terms.

There is a passage from the Book of Proverbs in the Old Testament that I'm sure Jesus knew and thought about in relationship to His mother, Mary. The writer is remembering his mother and what he learned from her. Here's part of what he wrote: "She opens her hand to the poor and reaches out her hands to the needy... Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come. She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue... Her children rise up and call her blessed."

What then, more specifically, are some of the things Jesus learned from His mother?

First of all, Jesus learned that God is like a mother.

Jesus was already aware that in the prophet Hosea in the Old Testament, God is compared to the Hebrew mother who teaches the child to walk, heals the child's wounds, and feeds the child. In addition, He knew that the prophet Isaiah speaks of God as having birth pangs and describes God as a mother comforting her children. In 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.

Not only was Jesus aware of the Old Testament tradition of God as a mother, but in His life with His mother, He experienced God's love and care through her firsthand. God is indeed like a mother.

God is like a mother because God is continually giving 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."

Since God is like a mother, Jesus learned that we can all be like mothers. 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 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 passage from the Gospel of Mark read earlier, Jesus is quoted as saying, "Whoever does the will of God is my brother, sister, and mother."

How beautiful it is to think of God's motherhood. This beautiful cathedral-like church; what else is it but a great cave of being, a great womb? The idea of a new birth is a mother symbol.

Pope John Paul I, in a public audience, said, “God is Father, but above all God is mother.” He was echoing the words of St. Anselm, in the eleventh century, who wrote this beautiful prayer:

“And you, Jesus, are you not also a mother? Are you not the mother who, like a hen, gathers her chickens under her wings? Truly, Lord, you are a mother, for both they who are in labor and they who are brought forth are accepted by you. So you, God, are the Great Mother. And you, my soul, dead in yourself, run under the wings of Jesus, your mother, and lament your griefs under His feathers. Ask that your wounds may be healed and that, comforted, you may live again. Christ my mother, by your gentleness, the badly frightened are comforted; by your sweet smell, the despairing are revived; your warmth gives life to the dead; your touch justifies sinners.”

So it is that Jesus learned from His mother that God is like a loving mother to all of creation, and all of us are to be the same.

Secondly, Jesus learned from His mother to have respect for all women. He learned that in God’s creation, women and men are equal.

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 women and men. Some examples: He broke the traditional customs in order to speak to a Samaritan woman. He took her theological questions seriously. He ignored customary barriers in permitting a woman of questionable character to anoint Him with expensive ointment and praised her sign of devotion. In all four gospels, Jesus is never reported as acting or speaking to women in a derogatory fashion. He treated all women as equals — as human beings who are loved by God. In other words, for Jesus, women were not creatures who filled roles such as wife, baby machines, nurse, housekeeper, cook, or sex object, but human beings capable of making important decisions and commitments.

The Gospel of John reports that Jesus saved a woman’s life. She was about to be stoned to death by a group of men because of the sin of adultery. Jesus intervened and said to the men, “Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.”

Thirdly, Jesus learned theology from His mother, and how to think theologically. That Mary was quite a theologian can be seen in her response to the Angel’s announcement that the child to be born would be the Savior. The response was a song of praise — known to us today as the “Magnificat,” because of its opening statement, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.”

Mary then went on to describe her faith in God and in God’s actions. Here’s part of what she said, “God has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. God has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; God has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich God has sent empty away.” Jesus learned from His mother God’s love of the poor and dispossessed. He also learned from her to appreciate both God’s holiness and God’s never-ending mercy.

I think Jesus also learned from His mother to be a sensitive and reflective theological thinker. Several times when the Gospel of Luke describes Mary, it is said of her, “Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart.” Mary pondered over things. She reflected on what God

might be doing through her and others. She made connections between God's activities and what was happening in her life and in the world at large.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, stayed with Him until He died. The Gospel of John reports that only three women, and none of the men who had been followers of Jesus, were there at the foot of the cross when He died, and His mother was one of those three. Her love, like God's love, knew no end.

What Jesus learned from His mother — first, that God is like a mother; second, He learned from her to respect all women and that women and men are equal in God's creation and deserve to be treated equally; and third, He learned theology from His mother and how to think theologically. Today on this Mother's Day, I invite you to ponder and reflect on what you have learned from your mother. Amen.