Sunday, May 13, 1990
WHAT I LEARNED FROM MY MOTHER
Matthew 20:20-28

The mother of the sons of Zebedee had a difficult task raising two of her children in particular. Her boys, James and John, were boisterous characters who had become disciples of Jesus, and they evidently hadn't changed much. In one instance, Jesus called them "sons of thunder."

Although her sons were now adults, their mother was still looking out for their welfare, according to this story in the Gospel of Matthew. She fell on her knees before Jesus one day and, perhaps with some embarrassment, asked if she could make a request. We can imagine that her two grown sons were standing there beside her, maybe a bit irritated and at least as embarrassed as she was. Jesus told her to make her request, and she asked for what all mothers of all times have desired for their children: respect and success. She said to Jesus, "Promise me that my two sons will sit on your right hand and your left hand when you come into your kingdom."

Had the sons put their mother up to this? Had the mother thought she could get something out of Jesus more easily than her sons? We don't know. The amazing thing was that Jesus did not honor this motherly concern in any way; he took no notice of the mother but rather spoke to the sons: "You do not know what you are asking." Then he clearly told them that to be with him in his cause involves not only honor but suffering, and that whoever would be first must become a servant of all.

After this episode, we do not hear much about the mother of James and John, except that the Gospel of Matthew tells us that when Jesus was crucified, she was there. She had become a follower of Jesus along with her sons, so much so that she was near the cross when he was crucified.

At first, she wanted to live her life through her children's success, but before she died, she became a person in her own right.

I like this mother of James and John because she reminds me of my own mother, who died twenty years ago this summer. She was the oldest of six children, and later as a wife and mother, she had seven children of her own. Her two oldest children were boys, my brother and I. Like the mother of James and John, my mother wanted the best for her sons and daughters, and she was also a dedicated follower of Jesus.

Early on, my mother, whose name was Irene but was known to all of her children simply as "Mom," decided to become a person in her own right. She finished high school in a day when not too many women went to high school. She became a public school teacher, teaching in a one-room school where some of her students were almost as old as she was. She had more formal education than my dad, who never finished the 8th grade because he came from a poor family and had to quit school to earn a living.

I am using my mother as the main illustration for this sermon on Mother's Day because recently, I came across a research project that revealed a surprising fact about adults in this country. Most of the people surveyed reported that their most troublesome relationship was between themselves and their parents. This surprised me because this has not been my own

personal experience and because we hear and read so often about difficulties teenagers have with their parents or which children at an earlier age have with their parents.

Even where the adults were living far away from their parents or where parents had died, the study revealed that many adults are still struggling with the basic conflict between the desire to be independent of parental control and the desire to affirm the deep belonging which they entered into at birth. There is always the tension of maintaining both intimacy and distance.

Read the letters to Dear Abby or Ann Landers, and one can see that many people are struggling to deal with this problem. Here's an example: "Dear Abby: I am 67 years old, and I am crazy. I got this way from taking care of my mother, who is 92. She is the most impossible woman who ever lived. Unfortunately, she is in better health than I am. I'd sign this, but she'd kill me. Stuck in Encino."

Thus, some people welcome Mother's Day with unreserved feelings of gratitude, affection, and celebration. Others view the day with a certain ambivalence. They feel obligated to honor their mothers but, at the same time, have a lot of bad memories and feelings. Many adults wonder what their continuing obligation is to their parents and especially their mother.

This morning, regardless of your relationship with your mother, I invite you to consider what you learned from your mother as I tell you what I learned from mine. Incidentally, I thought about my mother the other day when I heard a story about another mother who was very busy raising her children and felt housebound. Her husband invited her to join him at a company dinner party. She spent time at the library catching up on current events and the latest books. At the dinner, she found herself next to a distinguished guest, whom she charmed with her repartee. She was doing very well indeed when she suddenly noticed that everyone at the table was silently staring at her. "Why?" she wondered, and then realized that she was cutting the meat on her dinner partner's plate into small pieces. Old habits die hard.

Learning to Be a Good Parent and Recognizing Good Mothers

First of all, I learned from my mother how to be a good parent and how to recognize other good mothers. One of my greatest joys in life has been to participate in raising our own children with my wife, who has been and still is an excellent mother and now a grandmother.

I know my wife has been and is a good mother because our two daughters are such excellent mothers, and they learned that from her. We both marvel continually as we observe their love and patience in rearing their children, our grandchildren. My only regret is that my own mother died before she ever had a chance to see her granddaughters as mothers. She would have been proud and pleased.

Learning About God's Love and Forgiveness

Secondly, I learned from my mother that God is a loving and forgiving God and that we human beings are also to be loving and forgiving people. I can never remember a time when I was growing up when I did not feel loved and accepted.

Not only did my mother constantly forgive each one of her seven children, but she forgave my dad and others as well. Not only was she forgiving, but she went further and took positive action. I remember a young woman who was a friend of one of my sisters. This young woman, at age 17, became pregnant and was not married. She wanted to have the baby and keep it. There was a lot of finger-pointing in that little town where we grew up. What my mother did was let the young woman know that God is forgiving, and she held a baby shower for the young

woman so she could experience forgiveness and have the necessary items to begin her own motherhood.

Learning Patience in Pain and Suffering

Thirdly, I learned from my mother how to be patient in pain and suffering. At about age 15, she contracted some kind of bone disease, which had a gradual crippling effect on her that continued until she died. This did not keep her from having seven children, the first five of us being born at home. She had surgery numerous times for a variety of physical problems and was also injured in several automobile accidents. No doubt the deepest pain she felt — and which we all felt together as a family — was the death of her youngest child at age 10 because of a malignant brain tumor. All of us suffered together as we slowly watched my little brother die over a period of 18 weeks. But I'm sure no one suffered as deeply as my mother.

My mother's life was one of hard work. Her hands were never idle. I remember her heating water on a woodstove in the basement to do the weekly washing, making her own laundry soap, straining baby food before it could be purchased that way in stores, making homemade root beer, canning hundreds of jars of fruits and vegetables each year, planting a garden, always baking her own bread for the family, making butter from the cream we had from our own milk cows, and sewing clothes for my sisters.

When we were in college, we sent our laundry home by mail, which she then washed and ironed and returned to us by mail, and frequently we would find hidden among the clothes a box of homemade cookies.

A Feminist Before the Term Was Popular

Fourthly, my mother was a feminist before that word was used in our language. So I learned from her early on that women were not to be considered in any way subordinate to men. She was a leader in our small-town local church and in other community organizations as well, and she urged my sisters to be women in their own right — and they are.

Learning a Love of Music and Learning

I learned from my mother to have a love of music and a love of learning. Although Mom did not have the opportunity to get a college education, she saw to it that all six of her living children were college graduates, and she herself kept reading and learning until the day she died. She was always open to new ideas.

She learned to play the piano and organ at an early age and was the local church organist until she began having children. She saw to it that all of us learned to play at least one musical instrument, and she encouraged us to become church choir members as well as to participate in every possible musical activity during our public school years. When I was in high school, I was in the band, a boys' quartet, the boys' glee club, and the mixed chorus, as well as being in the church choir and playing in a local dance band on weekend nights.

With all of her knowledge about raising children, she was willing to help when each grandchild was born. I remember her packing her suitcase and coming to our home to stay for a few days when each of our first two children were born. At the same time, she was very careful not to criticize her daughter, sons, daughters-in-law, and sons-in-law as we all went about being parents. If asked, she would give her opinion, but she never made unsolicited negative comments.

Seeing God as a Mother as Well as a Father

One more very important thing I learned from my mother is that “Mother” is an appropriate metaphor for God as well as “Father.” In other words, God’s love is like a mother’s love as well as a father’s love.

This is underscored in a number of places in the Bible. 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 that were always obtained through a woman’s work — food and water. In the prophet Nehemiah, God is a seamstress, as in the book of Genesis, where God made garments to cover the nakedness of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Isaiah speaks of God as having birth pangs and also 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.

I learned from my mother that God is also like a mother because God continually gives birth to life. God is continually creating and making all 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.”

As I remember my mother, I also remember that Jesus used the metaphor of mother, as well as sister and brother, to describe those who do the will of God. In the Gospels, Jesus is quoted as saying, “Whoever does the will of God is my brother, sister, and mother.”

Jesus taught that 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.

Spiritually speaking, motherhood is not confined to mothers. On this Mother’s Day, we need to liberate and affirm the mother in each one of us. Amen.