Sunday, May 12, 1991
WHO IS MY MOTHER?
Matthew 12:46-50

Last week, a minister friend of mine who no longer has a parish said to me, “I’m glad I don’t have to preach a Mother’s Day sermon. It’s a difficult thing to do without being overly sentimental and yet have something fresh to say.” I agree with his observation.

Another minister told me of the trouble he got into one Mother’s Day when he stepped forward during the announcements and said, while holding a small carnation in his hand, that he wanted to honor the oldest mother present. Complete silence followed. It was a small congregation in which everyone knew each other. Finally, a voice from one of the back pews suggested, “Mary Helen.” But there was a quick reply from Mary Helen, who said, “Clara, you know you are as old as I am.” Eventually, the flower was pinned on a younger mother so the service could proceed.

I also heard about a minister who got into trouble because he unwisely chose as his text for his Mother’s Day sermon the passage from the Gospel of Luke where Jesus is quoted as saying, “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.” (Luke 14:26) I don’t know what he said in the sermon, but he was looking for a new parish shortly thereafter.

Why is Mother’s Day cherished by so many people? Perhaps a reminder of its origin will help us understand its popularity. The idea came from Anna Jarvis, who lived in Philadelphia. The year was 1906. She wanted to honor her mother, Mrs. Ann Reese Jarvis, who died a year earlier, on May 9, 1905. After registering the idea with the U.S. Patent Office to make the second Sunday in May Mother’s Day, Miss Jarvis spent a number of years showering governors, congressmen, mayors, educators, and newspaper editors with letters before she got her idea adopted nationally.

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, the 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. Her father was a Methodist Minister, and her mother taught classes at her father’s church in Grafton, West Virginia, before the family moved to Philadelphia in 1904.

Although Anna Jarvis first promoted her idea of Mother’s Day in 1906, it wasn’t until May 10, 1913, that Congress adopted a resolution endorsing the observance of Mother’s Day by Congress and Federal Government departments. The next year, Congress authorized the President to proclaim Mother’s Day nationally. President Wilson issued the first annual proclamation on May 9, 1914.

Many years later, when asked by a reporter why she started Mother’s Day, Anna Jarvis said that her mother was the kindest woman that ever lived. She remembered not only her mother’s love for her immediate family — there were three children, two girls, and a boy — but also how her mother cared for others. One example: her mother had lived in Philippi, West Virginia,

during the Civil War, and the war's divisions left many townspeople hating one another. After the war, Mrs. Jarvis arranged a Friendship Day Picnic at which people who hadn't spoken to each other for years shook hands and made up.

Anna Jarvis never married and had no children of her own, but she had taken care of her blind older sister until that sister died, so Anna Jarvis was a mother in other ways. After that sister died, what little money Anna had ran out, and she 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, Pa. There, on November 24, 1948, alone, blind, and penniless, she died.

One reason Mother's Day is so cherished by so many of us is that our mothers remind us of our indebtedness to others for almost everything important: our lives, our looks, our values. As the saying goes: "We drink from wells we haven't dug."

Celebrating Mother's Day does not mean that all mothers are angels or that being a biological mother confers some special merit on a person.

A woman I've known for years, who is the mother of nine children, told me that when people meet her for the first time and ask about her family and then discover that she and her husband have nine children, they often make comments filled with admiration. She said to me, "I'm pleased and proud to have these children, and I think being a good mother is one of the most important roles I could ever fill, but there is nothing especially meritorious about their conception. The existence of nine children in and of itself is no evidence that I am especially suited for motherhood." She went on to say that having nine children is no great achievement in and of itself. Mothers with nine children are not necessarily nine times as loving as those with one child.

A second reason Mother's Day is so cherished is that it emphasizes not only mothers but the importance of families as well. And there are lots of problems with families in our time. Too often in our culture, relations in the family come to resemble the rest of our society — a conglomeration of friendly strangers. We seem to have created a world where privacy is sought more than community, where no one is asked to suffer for anybody else, and where we want both to be intimate and still able to shake hands and say goodbye with no bad feelings. Such thinking makes relations between parents and children incomprehensible.

What makes being a child or a mother, or a father for that matter, so unusual is this: you didn't choose your parents, and they didn't choose you. You don't choose relatives; they are given. Even if you adopt a child, that child will grow to be so unlike the baby you brought home from the adoption agency that you will continually know that this child is someone who has been given rather than selected. Being in a family, therefore, means learning to love someone whom we didn't choose.

To a surprising degree, this lack of choice extends even to the person we marry. Most people think that the hardest part of marriage is deciding whom we should marry, making the right choice. We say we are deciding whether or not we are in love with this person, whether we are emotionally attached.

The church, however, cares less about our emotional attachments and more about whether or not we are people who are capable of sustaining the kind of commitment that makes love possible. When I officiate at a wedding, the marriage ceremony does not ask, "Bill, do you love

Mary?" The question rather is: "Will you love Mary faithfully as long as you both shall live?" Love is here defined as something we promise to do, a future activity, the result of marriage rather than its cause. That sounds odd to those of us devoted to the idea of choosing the "right" person. Yet for most of the church's history, marriage occurred among couples who hardly knew each other before the wedding.

I'm not advocating "arranged" marriages. Still, many marriages are more arranged than we like to admit. Sometimes parents send their children to prestigious colleges or universities so they can hopefully meet prestigious members of the opposite sex. We all know that it's helpful to marry someone with a similar social, economic, and religious background. Through dance lessons, piano lessons, summer camp, and college degrees, parents give their children the illusion that the choice of someone to marry is not being arranged. In discussing "arranged" marriages versus those not arranged, a man from India, where many marriages are still arranged, asked, "Who should be entrusted with such important matters, someone who has actually been married and has 50 years of life experience, or someone who has never been married and has had no experience except school?"

The point is that in all of our families, no matter how they came into being, we find ourselves having to learn to love people we did not necessarily choose. Most of us learn to make the best of it. Right there is a glimpse of us at our best. For right there is where we learn to be faithful, to love strangers, even though we did not necessarily choose them as someone we might have liked to love.

If you stop to think about it, isn't it true that no matter how our marriage came about, we never marry the one we thought we were marrying because marriage changes us? So you wake up one day and realize that the person next to you is not the person you committed your life to five years ago. Of course, you are not the same person either.

Being a parent is like that. Parents never get the children they thought they were giving birth to. Who plans to have a severely retarded child, a rebellious child, or a child who plays guitar in a rock band? You can choose an automobile, but you can't choose a child. You must receive a child. The Bible says a child is a gift, not a possession or a project.

Nor do we choose our mothers. They are given to us. And like all other relationships, love of children for their mothers and mothers for their children is not automatic. It's something that has to be learned, practiced, and cultivated. Furthermore, no matter how loving the relationship between mother and child, it's constantly changing.

The relationship between Jesus and his mother is a good example. One day when Jesus was teaching, his mother and his brothers tried to get a message to him through the crowd. Why his mother wanted to speak personally with him, we do not know.

Some Biblical scholars have suggested that she was worried about the growing opposition to his ministry and hoped to persuade Jesus to come back home with her. No doubt Jesus knew of his mother's fears. At the same time, he also knew that it would not help his mother or be of help to him if he gave up his ministry and returned home. He appreciated her loving concern but also wanted to show that he could reject her request and yet not reject her love. So when the message was given to him that his mother and brothers were waiting outside and wanted to speak with him, he said to the crowd, "Who is my mother and who are my brothers and sisters?" And stretching his arms and pointing to the crowd, he said, "Here are my mother and

brothers and sisters. Whoever among you does the will of God is my mother, brother, and sister."

In other words, all of us are to be mothers, brothers, and sisters to each other, which means we are to be loving and caring people to one another.

Who is my mother? Hopefully, each one of us has many mothers, many people who care about us and love us. And no matter who we are, we can be a mother to other people. Motherhood, in the Christian understanding of the term, is not limited to those who have children of their own or who have adopted children. To put it another way, in God's creation, we do not escape motherhood because we have no children of our own, whether we are male or female. To do the will of God, according to Jesus, is to be a mother, brother, and sister. Think of what this world would be like if we would all act like mothers, brothers, and sisters to each other in the best sense of those terms.

I don't know about you, but I had many loving mothers as I was growing up. In addition to my birth mother, there were aunts and grandmothers and schoolteachers — many of them were like mothers to me.

So today, we celebrate "mother-love," and hopefully, it is a part of all of us. Today, we also celebrate "mother-wisdom."

In a book by Ursula K. LeGuin, entitled Dancing at the Edge of the World, the author poses this hypothetical question: "Suppose a spaceship from another planet came to the earth and the captain said, 'We have room for one passenger; will you spare us a single human being so that we may converse at leisure during the long trip back...and learn from an exemplary person the nature of the race?'" Who would you choose to send? Would you choose to send a fine, bright, brave young man or woman, highly educated, at his or her physical peak? Here's what LeGuin proposes:

"I would go down to the local Woolworth's or the local village marketplace and pick an old woman, a mother — grandmother, over sixty, from behind the costume jewelry counter or the betel nut booth. She has worked hard at small seemingly unimportant jobs all her life, jobs like cooking, cleaning, bringing up children, selling little objects of adornment or pleasure to other people. She was a virgin once, a long time ago, and then a sexually potent fertile female, and then went through menopause. She has given birth several times and faced death several times — the same times. She is facing the final birth/death a little more nearly and clearly every day now. Sometimes her feet hurt terribly. She never was educated to anything like her capacity, and that is a shameful waste and a crime against humanity, but so common a crime should not and cannot be hidden from the outer space planet. She has a stock of sense, wit, patience, and experiential shrewdness."

It would be hard to explain to her why we want her to go, but it would be because only a person who has experienced, accepted, and acted the entire human condition, the essential quality of which is change, can fairly represent humanity. "Me," she'll say, "but I never did anything." Yet deep down, she knows, though she won't admit it, that Dr. Kissinger has not gone and will never go where she has gone, that the scientists and others have not done what she has done. Amen.