Sunday, May 8, 1994
FAITH OF OUR MOTHERS
Matthew 20:20-28

One of my favorite hymns has always been “Faith of Our Fathers.” I like both the tune and the text. However, if you pay close attention to the words, you will discover that the term “fathers” in this hymn would be better translated as “ancestors,” because what the hymn is celebrating is the unwavering commitment of our ancestors — both male and female — in the Christian faith, those who kept the faith “in spite of dungeon, fire, and sword,” as the first verse reminds us.

Another hymn needs to be written on the faith of our biological parents, stepparents, and adoptive parents. But especially, I would like to see a hymn written about the importance of the faith of our biological mothers, stepmothers, and those people who filled the role of mothers to us as we were growing up.

That’s what we’re going to be considering today on this Mother’s Day: the faith of our mothers who raised us, and that includes our biological mothers, grandmothers, stepmothers, adoptive mothers, and other women who helped us grow and mature on our spiritual journey.

A whole series of sermons could be done on the faith of mothers in the Bible and the impact of their faith on the lives of many of their sons and daughters in Biblical stories. There’s Sarah, the mother of Isaac, and Hagar, the mother of Ishmael. Other mothers of faith include Rebecca, the mother of Jacob; Rachel, Bilhah, Leah, and Zilpah, mothers of the sons and daughters in Jacob’s family.

In addition, we could consider the faith of such mothers as Hannah, the mother of Samuel; Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist; and Mary, the mother of Jesus. The faith of these mothers and how it influenced their children in their spiritual journeys is significant. And so it is with many of us. Many of us first experience the love of God through the love and care of our mothers.

Four years ago on Mother’s Day, I did a sermon with the title, “What I Learned From My Mother,” because the gift of her faith, even though she died twenty-four years ago, continues to make an important contribution to me as I pursue my spiritual journey. And a few years before that, I did a sermon called, “What Jesus Learned From His Mother.”

Now lest you misunderstand, being a mother does not imply sainthood. The other day a minister who no longer has a parish said to me, “I’m glad that I don’t have to preach a Mother’s Day sermon. It’s a difficult thing to do without being overly sentimental and yet having something fresh to say.” He’s right. It’s easy to be sentimental about motherhood in and of itself, and it can get one into trouble.

Another minister told me of the trouble he got into one Mother’s Day when he stepped forward during the announcements while holding a small carnation and said that he wanted to honor the oldest mother present. Complete silence. Finally, a voice from one of the back pews suggested, “Mary Helen.” But there was a quick reply from Mary Helen. She said, “Clara, you know that you are as old as I am.” Eventually, the flower was given to a younger woman so the worship service could proceed.

Part of the problem with Mother's Day observances is that we sometimes make the mistake of assuming that just because someone is a mother, this automatically confers some special merit on that individual.

A woman I know who is the mother of eight 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 eight children, they often emit little murmurs of admiration and respect as if she had done something very unusual.

She said to me, "I'm pleased and proud to have these children, but there was nothing especially meritorious about their births. Their existence does not testify to my character, or even any exceptional fertility, and certainly is no evidence that I am necessarily suited for parenthood."

She went on to say, "Anyone with the same biological equipment can have children; it is no great achievement in and of itself. And parents of eight children are not four times as good or loving or intelligent as parents with only two children. True, they have more experience, but as Bismarck said of his donkey, 'He has been through nine campaigns with me and knows no more than he did after the first.'"

So, the important thing about being a parent or a mother is to recognize that the quality of parenthood is more essential than the quantity, and that through parenthood, we can be channels of the love of God.

Recently, I came across a research project which revealed a surprising fact about adults in this country. Most of the people surveyed reported that their most troublesome relationship as adults was between themselves and their parents. This surprised me because we usually hear so much about the difficulty adolescents and teenagers 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.

Read the letters to Dear Abby or Ann Landers, and you can see that many adults are still struggling with this problem. Here's one 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. Signed, Stuck in Encino."

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

One of my favorite stories about mothers in the Bible is the one read earlier, a story about the mother of James and John who had become disciples of Jesus. Although her sons were now adults, their mother was still looking out for their welfare, according to this little story in the Gospel of Matthew. One day, she made a special request to Jesus with her sons at her side.

The context of the request was this: Jesus had been telling his disciples that they were going to Jerusalem and while they were there, he would be arrested, put on trial, and then crucified, and on the third day, he would be raised from the dead.

The mother of James and John was a part of the group who heard what Jesus had been saying, and it was then that she made her special request. She said, “Promise me that my two sons will sit on your right hand and your left hand when you come into your kingdom.” In other words, I want my two sons to be your second in command once you take over.

Had the two sons asked their mother to intercede on their behalf? Or was it her own idea? We don’t know for sure. But from what happened next, it appears that Jesus assumed that James and John had put their mother up to this. Instead of responding to their mother’s request, Jesus replied directly to James and John as if they had made the request themselves. He said, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you ready to suffer as I am about to suffer?” Jesus then explained to them that to be with him in his cause involves not only honor but sacrifice and that whoever would be first must become the servant of all.

After this incident, we do not hear any more 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.

This mother had a strong faith in God and also believed in her children. I appreciate the mother of James and John because she reminds me of my own mother, who died twenty-four years ago this summer. She was the oldest, with her twin brother, of six children, and then later as a wife and mother, had seven children of her own — four daughters and three sons. Like the mother of James and John, she wanted the best for her daughters and sons. She had a strong faith in God and a strong faith in her children, and her faith sometimes carried us when we did not have enough faith on our own. In that way, her faith encouraged us to have faith in ourselves and faith in God. We also learned from her faith when she and our dad and the rest of us had to deal with the death of the youngest child in our family at age ten because of a brain tumor.

From her faith, as she put it into action, we also learned that God is a loving and forgiving God and that we human beings are also to be loving and forgiving people.

I remember a young woman high school student who was a close friend of one of my sisters. This young woman, at age 17, became pregnant, was not married, and wanted to keep and raise her child. There was a lot of finger-pointing in that little town where we grew up. What my mother did was to let the young mother-to-be know that God is loving and forgiving by holding a baby shower for her in our home so she could experience love and forgiveness firsthand and so that she would have the necessary items to begin her motherhood.

Early on, my mother, whose first name was Irene, decided to become a person in her own right. She finished high school in a day when not too many women who lived out of town on a farm went to high school. There were no school buses, so she and her sister took a room in town. She became a public school teacher, teaching in a one-room school where some of her students were almost as old as she was.

I mention these memories of my mother not because she was a saint or super-mom or had no faults, but to illustrate that the faith and the spiritual journey of mothers can make an important contribution to the spiritual development of their children.

Two mothers were talking. One of them was very upset because she heard that the neighbors were accusing her son of breaking their window. “He couldn’t have done it,” she told her friend, “he hasn’t been out of the house in two days.” “Look,” the other mother said, “if your son didn’t break that window, you know it, and God knows it, and it doesn’t matter what the neighbors think.” After a thoughtful pause, the first mother said, “You’re right. I’m going to take a spiritual attitude and say, ‘to hell with it.'”

That can be a spiritual attitude. As I said in another sermon, there are things we need to let go of. Hopefully, the faith of our mothers will help us to do this.

I want to conclude this Mother’s Day sermon with what I said last year on Mother’s Day. Being a mother is more than being pregnant and helping to bring new life into the world; it is to be a caring, nurturing person. It is to nurture children and young people so that they become responsible, caring individuals on their own.

To be a biological mother involves pregnancy and giving birth, but we are all to be mothers in the way in which we love, care, and nurture others. The church is to be a mother, and we are to be mothers to each other.

On this day, when we honor mothers, we salute the mothers in our lives — our birth mothers, our adoptive mothers, our stepmothers, our grandmothers, our great-grandmothers, and those countless other people who have been a mother to us, be they neighbors, strangers, or relatives. We also honor the church as our mother, as this body which carries us, gives us new birth, and helps us grow and mature. Amen.