Sunday, May 12, 1996
MOTHER OF THE YEAR
Matthew 20:20-28

Several weeks ago, I had an extraordinary experience and honor. I was one of five individuals from across the country chosen to be on a panel to select the National Mother of the Year. This event is sponsored annually by American Mothers Inc., an organization first organized in 1935 to focus attention on the contributions of mothers in the home, the community, the nation, and the world. American Mothers Inc. is now the official sponsor of Mother's Day, although Mother's Day itself has a longer history.

Through the centuries, mothers have been honored in Greek mythology, in Biblical history, and at Roman festivals. In the early Christian era, "Mothering Sunday" was established in England, when servants and apprentices took gifts to their mothers and attended their own churches.

The first Mother's Day in the United States was developed shortly after the Civil War by Ann Reeves Jarvis, a mother from Grafton, West Virginia. She sought to comfort soldiers from both sides of the war and to bring love back to divided families. She organized a "Mother's Friendship Day" and sent invitations to Union and Confederate soldiers and their families.

In 1905, her daughter Anna began an intensive campaign to establish a National Mother's Day — a Sunday in May when spring flowers were plentiful. Her efforts led to official recognition by the U.S. Congress, and on February 4, 1914, President Woodrow Wilson signed the proclamation creating Mother's Day.

American Mothers Inc. was organized to carry on the work Anna Jarvis and her mother began. Since 1935, a National Mother of the Year has been chosen annually.

Each year, State Associations honor a remarkable mother by selecting her as the State Mother of the Year. From these state winners, a panel of judges selects the National Mother of the Year, one of the highlights of the American Mothers Inc. National Convention, held just before Mother's Day. This year, the convention was held in Lincoln, Nebraska, which is how I came to be one of the five judges. It was one of the most difficult assignments I've ever accepted.

By the time the convention was held in Lincoln, another panel of judges had narrowed the selection to 15 finalists. Our task was to choose from these finalists, although we had the option to select someone else after hearing speeches from all 41 State Mothers.

Several weeks before the convention, each of the five judges received the portfolios of the 15 finalists. Our job was to read them and, using a point system, rank the candidates without consulting anyone else. It was an exhausting and inspirational task, and when I was finished, I felt that all 15 were deserving of the honor.

When the convention opened, we judges were scattered throughout the audience to hear the speeches. Afterward, we met in private to make our decision. After lengthy discussion, we unanimously agreed that the honor should go to Carolyn Merrill Shumway from Hawaii.

As I prepared this Mother's Day sermon, I reflected on the remarkable mothers I met at the convention. I also thought about some exceptional mothers in the Bible and the impact their faith and lives had on their children and society.

There's Sarah, the mother of Isaac; Hagar, the mother of Ishmael; Rebekah, the mother of Jacob; Rachel, Bilhah, Leah, and Zilpah, the mothers of the sons and daughters in Jacob's family. There's Hannah, the mother of Samuel; Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist; and of course, Mary, the mother of Jesus.

The faith of these mothers shaped their children, and the same is true for many of us. Often, it's through the love and care of our mothers that we first experience the love of God.

One of my favorite biblical stories about mothers is from the Gospel of Matthew, about the mother of James and John. Even though her sons were grown men and disciples of Jesus, their mother was still looking out for them.

One day, she made a special request to Jesus with her sons by her side. Jesus had been telling his disciples that they were going to Jerusalem, where he would be arrested, tried, crucified, and then raised from the dead. Hearing this, the mother of James and John approached Jesus and said, "Promise me that my two sons will sit at your right and left hand in your kingdom."

In other words, she was asking for the highest positions for her sons.

We don't know if James and John asked their mother to intercede for them, but it seems likely. Jesus didn't respond to her but spoke directly to the brothers, saying, "You don't know what you're asking. Are you ready to suffer as I am about to suffer?"

Jesus explained that to be part of his mission involved not only honor but sacrifice, and that whoever wants to be first must become the servant of all.

After this, we don't hear any more about the mother of James and John — except that she was present at the crucifixion. Her faith in God and her love for her sons remained strong to the end.

This mother reminds me of my own mother, who passed away 26 years ago this summer, and she also reminds me of the incredible mothers I met at the National Convention.

Take Carolyn Merrill Shumway, who we selected as National Mother of the Year. She is the mother of seven children and two foster children, and along with her husband, Eric, President of Brigham Young University in Hawaii, she has cared for 18 teenagers who lived with the family over the years, including homeless youth, unwed mothers, and drug addicts. She's also a mother figure to thousands of children through the schools where she taught music part-time. The students at her husband's university call her "Mom," and she and her family started a program at a local prison, where they visit inmates who have not had visitors in years.

When asked about her philosophy of parenting, Carolyn said, "I truly believe the strength of a nation lies in the integrity of each home. The role of parents is to take children loaned from heaven and lovingly guide them to a life of service."

Another finalist was Bessie Letourneau from Wichita, Kansas, who raised 11 children, all of whom graduated from college and have gone on to successful careers. Bessie credits her strong Christian faith and church involvement for her success as a mother. Since her children

left home, she has volunteered at the Ronald McDonald House, where she supports out-of-town families whose children are undergoing treatment.

Several common traits emerged among these mothers: their deep Christian faith, strong partnerships with their husbands, and a commitment to teaching their children to serve others. These mothers understood that being a mother involves much more than giving birth — it's about raising responsible, caring individuals.

On this Mother's Day, I want to say to all mothers that being "Mother of the Year" has nothing to do with the number of children or grandchildren you have, or whether you've been officially recognized. You can all be "Mothers of the Year" in your own way by being loving, nurturing figures to the children in your life — whether they are your own children, stepchildren, foster children, or simply children in your community.

Today, we honor all mothers — birth mothers, adoptive mothers, stepmothers, foster mothers, grandmothers, great-grandmothers, and those who have been like mothers to us. We also honor the church as our spiritual mother, nurturing us in our faith.

Thank God for all our mothers. Amen.