Sunday May 12, 1996

MOTHER OF THE YEAR Matthew 20:20-28

Several weeks ago I had an extra-ordinary 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 could attend their own churches.

The first Mother's Day in the United States was developed shortly after the Civil War by Ann Reeves Jarvis, a gentle mother from Gruntytown, West Virginia. She sought to comfort the soldiers from both sides in the Civil War and to bring back love to divided families. She organized a Mother's Friendship Day with invitations sent to every Union and Confederate soldier 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. Through her efforts, government recognition was passed by the Congress of the United

States, with the approval of President Woodrow Wilson, on February 4, 1914.

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

Each year, State Associations honor a remarkable mother by selecting her as State Mother of the Year. Then from these 50 State Mothers, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico, a panel of judges selects a National Mother of the Year. This selection is one of the highlights of the American Mothers Inc. National Convention, held each year in different parts of the country and just preceding Mother's Day. This year the National Convention was held in Lincoln, Nebraska,

and that's how I came to be one of the five judges. It was one of the most difficult assignments I have ever accepted.

Fortunately, by the time the National Convention was held in Lincoln, another panel of judges had selected 15 finalists for our group to consider, although according to the rules after hearing a brief speech from all of the State Mothers, we had the option of choosing one who was not among the final 15.

As judges, each one of us had received the portfolios of the 15 finalists several weeks in advance of the convention and it was our task individually without consulting anyone to read the portfolios and using a common point system of criteria try to determine an order of preference. It was one

of the most exhausting and inspirational tasks I've ever undertaken. It took me almost one full day to complete that assignment. When I was finished I felt that all of the 15 were worthy of the honor of being National Mother of the Year.

At this point none of the five judges had met the others or consulted with each other in any way. When the National Convention opened here in Lincoln, we were scattered throughout the audience as we listened to forty-one State mothers deliver their speeches. Then we adjourned to a private room and spent several hours deciding on which mother would be named National Mother of the Year. After lengthly discussion we all five agreed the honor should go to Carolyn Merrill Shumway, from Hawaii. I'll tell you a little more about her and some of the other mothers later.

This past week as I was thinking about and preparing this Mother's Day sermon and remembering the remarkable mothers I met at the convention of mothers, I kept thinking of some of the exceptional mothers in the Bible and the impact their life and faith had on the lives of their children and the society in which they lived.

There's Sarah, the mother of Isaac; and Hagar, the mother of Ishmael. Other mothers of faith include Rebecca, the mother of Jacob; Rachael, Bilhah, Leah and Zilpah, mothers of the sons and daughters in Jacob's family.

I remembered 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 is significant. And so it is with many of us. It is often through the love and care of our mothers that we first experience the love of God.

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 the incident reported 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 part of the audience, and it was then that she made her special request. 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." In other words, "I want my two sons to have the highest positions 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. But from what happened next, it appears that James and John had asked their mother to do this. Because instead of responding to their mother's request, Jesus spoke direct-

ly 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 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 died.

This mother had a strong faith in God and also

believed in her children. I appreciate this mother of James and John because she not only reminds me of my mother who died 26 years ago this summer, but she also reminds me of the mothers who were nominated by their state associations to be National Mother of the Year.

Take as an example, Carolyn Merrill Shumway, named by our panel of judges to be National Mother of the Year. Mrs. Shumway is very active in her church congregation. She is the mother of seven children and two foster children. In addition, she and her husband Eric, who is President of Brigham Young University in Hawaii, have been mother and dad to eighteen teenagers who have lived with the Shumways through the years, some of whom were homeless, or drug addicts, unwed mothers or delinquents. Carolyn also

became a mother figure to thousands of children in six schools where she taught music part-time. The entire student body of the university of which her husband is president now refers to Carolyn as "Mom." At the local prison in Hawaii, Carolyn and her family have helped pioneer the "Adopt An Inmate" program. As a family they started visiting a prison inmate who had not had a visitor for 18 years, and through their regular visits changed his life.

Asked to explain her philosophy of being a parent here's what 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 happy life of work and service, using their gifts and skills to bring others along with them. One

of our family's mottos is 'Be a builder, not a destroyer,' encouraging us to be positive and supportive, accentuating each others' good points but kindly yet firmly correcting mistakes when necessary."

Another one of the 15 finalists who could've been named National Mother of the Year, is Bessie Letourneau from Wichita, Kansas. Reading her portfolio made me feel exhausted. Bessie and her husband Ray, have been married for 42 years. They are the parents of eleven children, all of whom have graduated from college and have gone on to productive, useful careers.

Bessie credits her success in being a good mother to her strong Christian faith and her regular activity in the church and the same is true of her

husband. She said, "My philosophy of parenting is pretty simple. I love each child as an individual but none more than another. I try to instill in them the importance of happiness, self worth, religious faith, acquiring an education and having loyalty to family and friends."

Bessie's main volunteer activity since her children have left home, in addition to her church, has been her continued activity at the Ronald McDonald House in Wichita. She has become a respected counselor to out-of-town families staying at the Ronald McDonald House while their critically ill or injured children receive medical care. Each week Bessie talks with young parents experiencing various difficulties. She said that explaining to the young father of a premature baby that he's expected to do his daily "house chores"

requires firmness and patience.

I could give you many more examples of loving mothers that I met in those several days. Several things were common to all of them. One, they credited their active Christian faith as a major contributor to their work as a mother and to the life of their family. Second, in every case there was a strong partnership between mother and father. Third, the children were seen as active participants in the life of the family.

Their individual gifts were respected and celebrated and each child saw himself or herself as a vital part of the family. Fourth, the family members separately and together felt a sense of responsibility not only to their own family but also to the larger community and they lived this out in

active ways. They were givers and not just takers.

These mothers especially realized that there is much more to being a mother than being pregnant and bringing a new life into the world. There are many women who are not able to have biological children, but have been wonderful mothers to adopted children or stepchildren or foster chilren or to the children in their neighborhood. You too are a mother of the year by being a loving, caring, nurturing individual so that the children you care for and influence become responsible caring individuals on their own.

I want also to say to all mothers who are here today and who are listening on radio or television, being "mother of the year," has nothing to

do with the number of children or grandchildren you have or whether or not you have been nominated by someone or group to be "mother of the year." You can all be "mothers of the year" in your own way to your children, your nieces, nephews, other family members and friends.

On this day when we honor mothers, we salute the mothers in our lives, our birth mothers, our adoptive mothers, our stepmothers, our foster mothers, 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.

Thank God for all our mothers. Amen.