Sunday, May 11, 1997
THE EVER-PRESENT MOTHER
Acts 1:6-14

Most of you are aware that I read many books on a variety of subjects. On this Mother's Day, I want to recommend a book that I hope each one of you will read. It's a book about a remarkable mother. In the front of the book, the author states, "I wrote this book for my mother, and her mother, and mothers everywhere." The title is The Color of Water. The subtitle is A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother. The author's name is James McBride.

It's a story about a white woman who was born in Poland on April 1, 1921, and came to this country with her parents as a young child. They lived mostly in Virginia, where her father was an Orthodox Jewish rabbi in a small synagogue and later owned a small general store where most of his customers were Black people.

The home in which she was raised was not the best. Her mother was crippled and weak, and her father was abusive to his wife and children. At age 19, she ran away from home and moved to New York City. Her family disowned her, and she never saw any of them again.

In New York City, she met and married a young Black man in 1942, who later became a minister. She and her husband had eight children and lived most of the time in poverty. While still a young man, her husband died of an incurable disease, so she was left alone to raise their eight children. After a time, she met and married another Black man, and they had four more children. Her second husband, who was quite a bit older than she, preceded her in death. Now she had 12 children to raise as a single parent. Mostly, it was her Christian faith, strength, and courage that kept her family together. She is still alive today and lives in New Jersey with one of her grown daughters. The remarkable thing is this — all twelve children are college graduates, some with postgraduate degrees, and all are productive, contributing members of society. They credit their success to their remarkable mother. Even today, she remains the ever-present mother, and once she dies, her influence will still be alive in her children and grandchildren.

Here's what her son, the author, says in the introduction to the book:

"As a boy, I never knew where my mother was from — where she was born, who her parents were. When I asked, she'd say, 'God made me.' When I asked if she was white, she'd say, 'I'm light-skinned,' and change the subject. She raised twelve Black children and sent us all to college and, in most cases, graduate school. Her children became doctors, professors, chemists, teachers — yet none of us even knew her maiden name until we were grown. It took me fourteen years to unearth her remarkable story — the daughter of an Orthodox Jewish rabbi, she married a Black man in 1942 — and she revealed it more as a favor to me than out of any desire to revisit her past."

This mother's Jewish name was Ruchel Zylska. When they came to America, her parents changed her first name to Rachel, and the family's last name to Shilsky. When she came to New York City in 1941, she got rid of that name completely and never used it again. She changed her first name to Ruth.

After her second husband died in 1972 and after her 12 children were raised and on their own, Ruth went to college and graduated in 1986 from Temple University in Philadelphia, where she

received a degree in Social Work Administration at age 65. Today at age 76, Ruth travels to Paris, London, New York, and Atlanta regularly, works as a volunteer with the Philadelphia Emergency Center, a shelter for homeless teenage mothers; runs a reading club in Ewing, New Jersey, Public Library; and works at the Jerusalem Baptist Church in Trenton, New Jersey, in their program to feed the homeless.

I'm not going to tell you any more of this unusual story except to explain the title, because I want you each to read the book for yourself. The title, The Color of Water, comes from an answer this mother would always give her children when they asked, "What color is God?" Her answer was, "The color of water." When they would ask, "What color are we?" all she would answer was, "You're a human being."

When I was reading this story, I kept thinking of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Like Ruth in The Color of Water, Mary, too, was the ever-present mother. Although the Bible stories do not tell us very much about Mary when Jesus was a young child and a young man, we do know that when her son became an adult, she listened to his teachings and continued to give him advice. She was at the foot of the cross when Jesus died. She was part of the early group of followers after his resurrection, and in the scripture lesson read this morning, following the ascension of Jesus, she remained an active member of the early church.

Listen to this verse from Acts 1:14: "All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers."

When I was reading The Color of Water, I also kept thinking of how my mother's influence continues to be a force in my life, and in the lives of my sisters and brother, even though she died 27 years ago. And then I kept thinking that this influence and presence must be something like the influence and presence the early followers of Jesus experienced, following his death, resurrection, and ascension. Let's examine that for a moment so that we can see how it relates to the ever-present love of mothers.

After the death of Jesus on Good Friday and the experience of Easter on the Sunday following, we have the testimony of his followers that they experienced the loving presence of Jesus in a number of particular times and places. He was with them in one place and then would disappear and would appear without warning in another place. These early followers still depended on him in much the same way as they did before he was killed.

However, in a few days or weeks, a change took place. We don't know if it happened all of a sudden or more gradually. The change was that Jesus was no longer with them in a visible, physical sense so that they could say, "There is Jesus over there," or "Here he is." The early church expressed this change in relationship and dependency upon him by saying he had "ascended."

Following this ascension, something else happened. Now they began to experience Jesus as a power or spirit within them and among them. He was gone, but he was ever-present. It was as if the power of the risen Christ was now within each one of them and among them, especially when they were gathered together. He was absent from them in a physical sense yet present within and among them in a deeply spiritual sense.

What does this experience tell us about the ever-present love of God as expressed in Jesus and about the ever-present love of our mothers, which is also an expression of God's love?

First, the ascension of Jesus reminds us that in someone's absence, we can begin to see and understand them in a new way. This sounds like a contradiction, so let me explain.

It often takes distance in time as well as in space to give us perspective. If we are always very close to an event or person, it's difficult to see that event or person with a new understanding.

When James McBride, the author of The Color of Water, became an adult and lived away from his mother, and when he began to learn more of her history, he understood her with a new sense of appreciation.

When Lincoln's Gettysburg Address was first delivered, it was characterized in some American newspapers as a cheap political harangue that desecrated the soldiers' graves, but distance has now helped us see it more clearly.

Jesus said more than once to his disciples, "What I am doing now you do not understand, but afterward, you will understand." How true that is of much of life. There are so many things we cannot truly understand while we are in the midst of them. It's something like looking at one tiny part of a large map very close up without being able to see what is all around it. It doesn't make much sense until you back away and then see the small part in the context of all the rest of the map around it.

Jesus had been with his disciples for several years in a very close and intimate relationship. He had tried to show them and tell them in many different ways that he and God were intimately connected. He wanted them to understand that if they knew him, they would know God also, but they did not get it. At the Last Supper, in frustration, Philip said, "Show us God and we will be satisfied."

Jesus answered, "Have I been with you so long and yet you do not know me, Philip?" The fact is that being present with each other, no matter how intimate the relationship, does not reveal to us all there is to know about each other. The truth is, the more experience in living we have, the more we come to know and sense that closeness to another person and to God grows in continuous interplay between presence and absence, between intimacy and distance.

In absence, in distance, in memory, we can come to see each other in a fresh way. We are less distracted by each other's idiosyncrasies, and we are better able to see and understand each other's inner core. In memory, we are able to be in touch with each other's spirit. This is true of God, and it is true of our mothers.

Jesus knew this and said to his disciples, "It is to your advantage that I go away," and he went on to explain that once he was gone, they would come to experience him and know him in a manner not possible before.

We all know, too, that memory can sometimes distort, falsify, and is subject to selective perception. But memory can also clarify, purify, and bring into focus. Distance and absence can give us perspective. Has it not been your experience, as it has been mine, that only after I was gone from the home where I grew up did I truly begin to appreciate it for what it was? Then I saw my mother and father in a different light. And now, since both of them have died, I see them from a different perspective.

In addition, from the story of the ascension of Jesus, we also discover that his leaving them in a physical sense was necessary if his followers were to have their freedom and responsibility

safeguarded. The testing of their faith required his absence. Their patience and fidelity could not be adequately measured unless he was gone from them.

If they were to learn to carry their own cross, they had to do it when he was not there. If they were to bear the burdens of others, sweating and agonizing under the load, Jesus must not be so near, so immediately available as to provide an easy escape. The ascension of Jesus was for their sake and ours.

The good news is that his followers discovered — and we can discover — that although Jesus was absent in a physical way, he was very much present as they carried on their work. Furthermore, it was only when he was gone from them in a physical sense that his followers were able to see him in other people. Jesus is present in the stranger, the neighbor, the beggar, the friend, and in the enemy, all of whom we are commanded to love. If we focus too much on Jesus as a physical person, we can miss the other places he is present.

They discovered, and we can discover, that Christ comes to us in the guise of children, the hungry and the homeless, and the neighbor in need next door. Now we can truly understand what Jesus meant when he said, “As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it unto me.”

There’s one more point to be made. It wasn’t until the ascension, until Jesus was physically absent from his followers, that they got to work on their own. Had he stayed with them as a visible presence, it might never have occurred to them that they were now Christ’s eyes, hands, and feet. They were to be the “body of Christ,” even as the church today is to be the “body of Christ.”

We know how this works out in our human relationships and especially with our mothers. Ascensions have to take place. I can remember when we were children at home, the several times our mother was away from us for an extended length of time because of surgery and hospitalization. Then we had to be on our own, prepare our meals, do the laundry, clean the house, and through that, we learned responsibility. And as we were doing these things, we knew also that our ever-present mother was with us in a special way.

So on this Mother’s Day, in addition to remembering and honoring the mothers who are still with us or who live near to us, we also remember and honor those mothers who have died or who live far away, but yet who are ever-present. We remember, too, those women who want children but are unable to bear children. We remember stepmothers, mothers-in-law, and grandmothers.

In addition, we remember those mothers who have lost children in death, those mothers who have placed children for adoption, and those mothers who are, for one reason or another, alienated from their children. We know, and God knows, that for many of you in these categories, Mother’s Day is not easy but is filled with pain. God grant that we can all come to know and experience the “ever-present mothering love of God.” Amen.