Sunday, May 9, 1999
MANY MOTHERS
Matthew 12:46-50

A minister colleague who no longer serves a local congregation said to me, “I’m delighted I don’t have to give a Mother’s Day sermon. It’s a difficult assignment to carry out without being overly sentimental and yet have something to say.” I agree with his observation that it’s not an easy sermon to write, but I like the idea of Mother’s Day, and I look forward to giving the sermon on this day.

Another colleague told me of the trouble she got into one Mother’s Day when she stepped forward during the announcements and said, while holding a small orchid in her hand, that she wanted to honor the oldest mother present. Complete silence. It was an awkward moment. Finally, a voice from one of the back rows suggested, “Mary Helen.” There was a quick reply from Mary Helen, who said, “Clara, you know you are as old as I am.” Eventually, the flower was given to a younger mother so the worship service could continue.

There are also some Biblical texts which are unsuitable for a Mother’s Day sermon. In the Gospel of Luke, the writer quotes Jesus as saying, “Whoever comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26).

Why is Mother’s Day so cherished by so many of us? Not everyone has a biological mother present, and, as we shall see later in this sermon, each one of us has many mothers in our lives.

Here’s a bit of history about the origin of Mother’s Day in the United States. Some people suspect that greeting card companies or florists started it all, but the idea came from Anna Jarvis, who lived in Philadelphia. The year was 1906. She wanted to honor her mother, 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 several years sending letters to governors, congressmen, mayors, educators, and national figures to promote it.

Ms. Jarvis wasn’t the first person to propose a day to honor mothers. 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 a program to honor mothers in 1887, which became an annual event locally.

But it was Anna Jarvis’ persistence that finally made it a national observance. Her continual promotion of the event eventually persuaded Congress to adopt it. The resolution was passed on May 10, 1913. A year later, 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 worked so hard to get a national observance of Mother’s Day, Ms. Jarvis said it was because her mother was the kindest woman who ever lived. She remembered not only her mother’s love for her biological children — there were three, two girls and a boy — but also how her mother cared for others.

One example is how her mother lived in West Virginia during the Civil War, which 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 reconciled.

Anna Jarvis never married and had no children of her own, but she fulfilled the role of mother in other ways. She took care of her blind older sister until that sister died. Later, Anna Jarvis became blind, and when she died on November 24, 1948, she was penniless and alone.

One reason Mother’s Day is so cherished by many of us is that mothers remind us of our deep indebtedness to others for almost everything. 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 perfect or that being a biological mother confers some special merit on a person.

A second reason Mother’s Day is cherished is that it emphasizes not only mothers but also the importance of families, with the mother often being the center of the family. Years ago, on many official church calendars, the term “Mother’s Day” was replaced with “Festival of the Christian Home.” However, that term never quite caught on, and I’m glad it hasn’t.

In her book The Nine Fantasies That Will Ruin Your Life (and the Eight Realities That Will Save You), Dr. Joy Browne reminds her readers that for most of human history, people lived in extended families — the larger, the better. Bigger families meant more hands to do the work, raise the children, gather the crops, and fight the enemy.

When society changed from being primarily agricultural to industrial, the nuclear family — mom, dad, and several children — became the norm, and the extended family began to disappear. People moved from farms to cities, lived in apartments, and often far away from their extended family. Over time, more mothers began to work outside the home, and that trend has continued.

Today, nearly two-thirds of all children are raised in single-parent households. As the family unit has shrunk, the importance of mothers as caregivers has grown, sometimes to nearly mythic proportions. In the larger extended family of the past, child care was often shared by older children, aunts, grandmothers, and neighbors. The mother did not have to bear the caregiving role alone. It was like being part of a special group called “the mothers.”

One woman wrote: “You probably remember this kind of motherhood from when you were a child, even if you never knew what to call it. Once when I was seven, I was playing in the park on a blustery fall day. My two friends and I had spent what seemed like hours challenging each other with underdoggies, head-first slides from the top of the monkey bars. Our cheeks were flushed with exertion, and our coats lay in a heap on the sawdust under the swings.

Then Mrs. Weeks, an acquaintance of my mother’s, arrived. Her kids were dressed for winter; I wore only my T-shirt. Mrs. Weeks stopped me at the bottom of the slide and told me to put on my coat. When I protested that my mother hadn’t made me wear it, Mrs. Weeks put her nose down close to mine and scowled. ‘I’m a mother,’ she snapped, ‘and that’s good enough. Now put on your coat.’ I did. Later that afternoon, I marched across the street to apologize while my mother watched from our front porch with her jaw set and her arms folded.”

Unfortunately, we don’t always have many mothers in our lives now. Because of this and other factors, a new term in today’s world is “dysfunctional family.” I don’t like the word. All families,

no matter their size, function — some better than others. The term “dysfunctional” has lost meaning and is often used as an excuse for bad behavior. Too often, I hear someone say, “I come from a dysfunctional family; that’s why I act this way.”

As Dr. Joy Browne says, “That’s why adulthood was invented — to allow us to sort through what we were taught as children and pick and choose appropriate behavior.”

On this Mother’s Day, there’s another thing about parents and families we need to remember: You don’t choose your family; they are given to you. Even if you adopt a child, that child will grow up to be someone you didn’t expect. Being in a family means learning to love people we didn’t choose.

The same is true of marriage. Most people think the hardest part of marriage is making the right choice of a partner. It’s an important choice, but the church cares less about our emotional attachments and more about whether we are capable of sustaining the kind of commitment that makes love possible. When I officiate at a wedding, the ceremony doesn’t ask, “Bill, do you love Mary?” The question is, “Will you have Mary to be your wife, and will you love her faithfully as long as you both shall live?” Love is here defined as something we promise to do, a future activity.

The point is that in all our families, we learn to make the best of it. Learning to love people we did not choose can show us at our best. It’s where we learn to be faithful and to love even though we did not necessarily choose them.

When you stop to think about it, isn’t it true that no matter how your marriage came about, you never marry the person you thought you were marrying? Life itself changes us, and marriage changes us. We all change as we grow, so you wake up one day and realize the person next to you is not the same as the one you committed to 10 years ago. But you aren’t the same either.

The same is true of being a mother or father. Parents never get the children they thought they were going to have. Who plans for a child with special needs or a rebellious child or a child who plays guitar in a rock band? 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. As we grow and change, so do our mothers. Love between children and their mothers is not automatic; it must be learned, practiced, and cultivated.

The relationship between Jesus and his mother is a good example. One day, while Jesus was teaching, his mother and brothers tried to get a message to him through the crowd. We don’t know why his mother wanted to speak with him. Whatever the reason, Jesus used the moment as a teaching opportunity. When told that his mother wanted to see him, he said, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers and sisters?” Then, stretching out his arms, he pointed to the crowd and said, “Here are my mother, 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. Who is my mother? Hopefully, each of us has many mothers — people who care for and love us. No matter who we are, we can be a mother to others. In the Christian understanding, motherhood is not limited to those with biological or adopted children.

I don’t know about you, but in addition to my biological mother, I had many loving mothers growing up. Today, we celebrate mother-love, which hopefully resides in all of us. We give thanks to God for the mother who raised us, for the many others who helped, and for the mother-love that is part of God’s love. Amen.