Book 37

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 a

small congregation in which everyone knew each other. 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

people? One obvious reason is that each one of us has a biological mother. In fact as we shall see later in this sermon, each one of us has many mothers.

Here's a bit of history about the origin of Mother's Day in the United States. Some people suspect that the greeting card companies or the 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, 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 a number of years sending letters to governors, congressmen, mayors, educators and

newspaper editors before she got her idea adopted nationally.

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' idea that finally made it a national observance. Her continual promotion of the event finally persuaded Congress to adopt a

resolution endorsing the observance of Mother's Day by Congress and Federal Government departments. 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 that 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. Her mother had lived in West Virginia

during the Civil War and the war's divisions 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 made up.

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 so many of us is that our mothers remind us of our indebtedness to others for almost everything

important: our lives, our looks, our values. 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 so cherished is that it emphasizes not only mothers but the importance of families as well and the mother is at the center of the family. In fact years ago on many official church calenders the term "Mother's Day" was replaced with "Festival of the Christian Home." But that term has never quite caught on and I'm glad that it hasn't.

I do know there is a lot of fantasizing about the American family. 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 have 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 an agricultural economy to an industrialized one, the nuclear family, mom, dad, and several children came into being and the extended family began to disappear. People moved from the farms to the cities, lived in apartments and often far away from

grandparents, aunts and uncles. During World War II, more and more mothers began to work outside the home and that trend has continued.

Now that's even changed. The nucleus is getting smaller and smaller. Today nearly two-thirds of all children are raised in single-parent households.

As the family unit shrank, the importance of mother as caregiver grew to nearly mythic proportions. Previously in the larger extended family, child care was also provided by older children and aunts, grandmothers and neighbors, while the father figure, if and when he was present, assumed total economic responsibility. There were many mothers. It was like being part of a special group call "the

motherhood."

One woman wrote: "You probably remember the 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 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.

'You're not my mother,' I sneered defiantly. 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 do not 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 what their size, function. Some do better than others. The term "dysfunctional" has no meaning anymore except as an excuse for bad behavior. Too often I hear someone say, "I come from a dysfunctional family

and..." They use that excuse to explain their bad behavior. As Dr. Joy Browne says in her book. "That's why adulthood was invented--to allow us to sort through what we were taught as children and pick and choose appropriate behavior."

She goes on to remind us that there's too much fantasy about family life in the good old days especially since politicians coined the term "family values" as shorthand for "I'm the good guy and my opponent is in favor of the downfall of Western civilization as we know it."

"Family values" is a useless term unless we specifically define the values we are talking about. We forget there are good family values and bad

family values. Many so-called traditional families included the beating of women and children and the early death of the father.

What each one of us has to remember is that who you are is only partially determined by how you were raised. Now that you're all grown up, you get to raise yourself. You can understand why you do what you do and what you can do to change it. If you don't like the way you were raised you can raise your children differently or keep the things that worked and discard those that didn't, keeping in mind that your children aren't you and that times do change.

On this Mother's Day, there's another thing about parents and families we need to remember. You

didn't choose your parents and they didn't choose you. You don't choose relatives. They are given. Even if you adopt a child, that child will grow up to be so unlike the baby you brought home from the adoption agency or biological mother that you will continually know that this child is someone who has been given rather than selected. Being in a family therefore means learning to love people we didn't choose.

To a surprising degree, this lack of choice extends even to the person we marry. Most people think that the hardest part of marriage is making the right choice of a partner. It is an important choice. We say we are deciding whether or not we are in love with this person, whether we are emotionally

attached. And that too is important.

The church, however, cares less about our emotional attachments and more about whether or not we are people who are capable of sustaining the kind of commitment that makes love possible. When I officiate at a wedding, the marriage ceremony does not 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 result of our commitment in addition to its cause.

The point is that in all of our families, no matter how they came into being, we find ourselves having to

learn to love people we did not necessarily choose. Most of us learn to make the best of it. Learning to love people we did not choose can give a glimpse of us at our best. It is where we can learn to be faithful, to love others even though we did not necessarily choose them as someone we might have liked to love.

When you stop to think about it, isn't it true that no matter how your marriage came about, you never marry the one you thought you were marrying because life itself changes us and marriage changes us. We all change as we grow. So you wake up one day and realize that the person next to you is not the person you committed your life to 10 years ago. Of course you are not the same person either.

The same is true of being a mother or a father. Parents never get the children they thought they were giving birth to. Who plans to have a retarded child, or a rebellious child, or a child who plays the guitar in rock band? You can choose an automobile but you can't choose a child. 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. In the same way that we grow and change so also do our mothers. And like all other relationships, love of children for their mothers and mothers for their children is not automatic. It's something that has to be learned, practiced and cultivated.

The relationship between Jesus and his mother is a

good example. One day when Jesus was teaching, his mother and his brothers tried to get a message to him through the crowd. Why his mother wanted to speak with him personally we do not know.

Whatever the reason, Jesus used the incident as a teaching opportunity. When the message was given to him that his mother wanted to see him, he said to the crowd, "Who is my mother and who are my brothers and sisters?" And stretching his arms, he pointed to all of them and said, "Here are my mother and 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 one of us has many mothers, many people who care about us and love us. No matter who we are we can be a mother to other people. Motherhood, in the Christian understanding of the term is not limited to those who have children of their own, or who have adopted children.

I don't know about you, but in addition to my biological mother I had many loving mothers as I was growing up. So today we celebrate mother-love and hopefully it is a part of all of us. Today we also give thanks to God for the mother who raised us and for the many other mothers who helped and for the mother-love that is a part of God. Amen.