Sunday, May 14, 2000
THE SHEPHERD MOTHER
John 10:11-18

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters, he restores my soul." (23rd Psalm) This is undoubtedly the favorite Psalm for many people. I'm sure Jesus knew it from memory.

So it's no surprise that in today's scripture reading, Jesus applied the shepherd metaphor to himself by saying, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.... I know my own and my own know me." He also said, "I have other sheep who do not belong to this fold."

Even though most of us in today's urban society have never seen or met a shepherd, and we probably don't like to think of ourselves as sheep, it can be comforting to think of God as a shepherd. I believe it's also helpful to think of our mothers as shepherds, in spite of the fact that shepherds in the Bible are usually described as being masculine. As I was preparing this Mother's Day sermon and remembering my own mother, I recited the 23rd Psalm and substituted the word "mother" for "Lord." "My mother is my shepherd, I shall not want. She makes me lie down in green pastures, she leads me beside still waters, she restores my soul." That sounds okay, I said to myself. As I recall my mother while growing up, these words are very descriptive. And maybe I was more like a sheep than I wanted to admit.

What's been true for me has no doubt been true for many of you. My experience of God as being like a shepherd has come in large part because of my mother being like a shepherd. I'm going to tell you about her this morning on this Mother's Day so that you might remember your mother and what you learned from her about God being like a shepherd.

I want to begin by noting that no mother is perfect, in the same way that no shepherd is perfect. I also want to acknowledge that even though all of us have one or more mothers — for example, I had my birth mother until I was 39 years old and then she died, and I've had a stepmother for another 29 years, and some of my aunts acted like mothers. There are those who have birth mothers and adoptive mothers. There are others who were raised by their grandmothers or an aunt or even an older sister. And there are those who wanted to be birth mothers but, for one reason or another, never were, and you might feel a void in your life. There are also those mothers who have had one or more children precede them in death and therefore have experienced deep suffering.

My mother died suddenly almost 30 years ago, in August 1970, at age 67. She was the oldest, with her twin brother, of six children in her family. Her parents were farmers. As a wife and mother, she had seven children — three sons and four daughters — and experienced the pain of having her youngest child die at age 10.

Early on, my mother, whose name was Irene but was known to all of her children simply as "Mom," decided to become a person in her own right. She finished high school at a time when not very many young women went to high school in the area where she lived. Because there were no school buses and she lived on a farm far from town, she often rented a room in town during the school year, as did some other rural students. Upon graduation from high school, she became a public school teacher in a one-room schoolhouse in the country, where some of her students were almost as old as she was. She had more formal education than my dad,

who never finished the 8th grade because he came from a poor family and had to quit school to earn a living.

Not all mothers are automatically good shepherds, and not all children are good sheep. I came across a research project that revealed what, to me, was a surprising fact about many adults in this country: Most of the people surveyed reported that their most troublesome relationship was between themselves and their parents.

Even where the adults were living far away from their parents, or where parents had died, the study revealed that many adults were still struggling with the basic conflict between the desire to be independent of parental control and the desire to affirm the deep belonging which they entered into at birth or adoption. There is always the tension of maintaining both intimacy and distance. In some ways, that's true of our relationship with God.

Read the letters to Dear Abby or Dear Ann Landers and you can see that many people are struggling to deal with this problem. Here's one example: "Dear Abby: I am 67 years old and I am crazy. I got this way from taking care of my mother, who is 92. She is the most impossible woman who ever lived. Unfortunately, she is in better health than I am. I'd sign this, but she'd kill me. Stuck in Encino."

Thus, some people welcome Mother's Day with unreserved feelings of gratitude, affection, and celebration. Others view the day with ambivalence or even wish such a day could be avoided. They feel obligated to honor their mothers, but at the same time have a lot of bad memories and pain. Many adults wonder what their continuing obligation is to their parents and especially their mothers, and many mothers wonder what their continuing obligation is to their children.

This morning, regardless of your relationship with your mother, I invite you to think of what you learned from your mother as a shepherd and how that affects your understanding of God, as I tell you about my mother. And remember, no metaphor is perfect.

Being a mother is a 24-hour-a-day job. Someone told me about one young mother who was very busy raising her children. Her husband invited her to join him at a company dinner party. She was delighted to have a free evening and found a good babysitter. Because it had been a while since she had been at a social event, she spent some time at the library catching up on current events and the latest books. At the dinner, she found herself next to a distinguished guest whom she charmed with her conversation. She was doing very well indeed when she suddenly noticed that everyone was staring at her. Why, she wondered, and then realized that she was cutting the meat on her dinner partner's plate into small pieces.

But now back to the subject of our mothers as shepherds. I learned from my mother how to be a good parent, as did my brother and sisters. One of my greatest joys in life has been to participate in raising our own children with my wife, who has been and still is an excellent shepherd mother and grandmother. My mother had the patience of a good shepherd, as does my wife, Rowena. My biggest regret is that my mother died before she had a chance to see her grandchildren as parents. She would've been proud and pleased.

Secondly, I learned from my mother that God is like a loving and caring shepherd and that we human beings are also to be loving and forgiving people. I cannot remember a time when I was growing up that I did not feel loved and accepted.

Not only did my mother constantly forgive each one of her seven children, she also forgave my dad and others as well.

Third, I learned from my shepherd mother how to be patient in pain and suffering. Sometime around age 15, it was discovered that she had some kind of bone disease, which had a slow crippling effect on her, continuing until she died. Accurate diagnosis in her case and adequate medical care were almost non-existent. This did not prevent her from having seven children, the first five being born at home. She had surgery numerous times for a variety of physical problems and was also injured in several auto accidents.

We also learned from our shepherd mother how to work. Her hands were never idle. I remember her heating water on a wood-burning stove in the basement so as to have hot water for the washing machine. Only later did we get an electric water heater. For years, she made her own laundry soap, crushed fruits and vegetables through a strainer for baby food, and canned a variety of fruits and vegetables each year. She always planted a large garden, baked her own bread for the family, made butter from the cream we got from our own milk cows, and made most of the clothes for my sisters.

When we were in college, we sent our laundry home by parcel post, which she then washed and ironed and mailed back to us. Frequently, we would find cookies and other homemade goodies packed among the clothes.

Fourth, my mother was a feminist before that word was used in our language. I learned from her early on that women were not to be considered in any way subordinate to men. She was a leader in our small-town local church and in other community organizations as well, and she urged my sisters to be women in their own right, and they are.

Fifth, I learned from my mother to have a love of music and a love of learning. Although she did not have the opportunity to get a college education, she, along with my dad, saw to it that all of her six living children were college graduates. She kept reading and learning until the day she died. She was always open to new ideas, and she firmly believed that tomorrow can be better than today.

She learned to play the piano and organ at an early age and was the local church organist until she began having children. She saw to it that all of us learned to play at least one musical instrument, and she encouraged us to become church choir members in addition to participating in every possible musical activity during our public school years.

With all of her knowledge about raising children, she was willing to help when each grandchild was born. I remember her packing her suitcase and coming to our home to stay for a few days when each of our first two children were born. At the same time, she was careful not to give unsolicited advice to her daughters and daughters-in-law as we went about being parents.

I also learned from my mother that both “mother” and “shepherd” are helpful metaphors for God. God’s love is like a mother’s love, a shepherd’s love, as well as a father’s love.

There’s one more point I want to make in this sermon. As a shepherd leader of his followers, Jesus gave them one overall guiding principle they were to follow for the rest of their lives. It’s recorded in the gospel according to John. It was one of his final instructions before his death, as they were having their last meal together. He said it was a new commandment: “I give you a

new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

Since, as I mentioned earlier, my mother died suddenly, I've often wondered what her last words of advice to me and my siblings would've been had she known in advance that she was going to die very soon. And if you're a parent, ask yourself now: What would you say to your children today if you knew you were going to die tomorrow? What guiding principle would you suggest as a foundation for their lives?

I like to think that my mother would've said almost the same thing that Jesus said, although in her own words. It could've gone something like this: "There's one principle I want you to remember above all else after I die. Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. Then everyone will know you are my children if you have love for one another and practice unconditional love toward all people." I hope this is also what my wife and I would say to our children and grandchildren were we to know it was our last meal together.

Why is this such good advice? Because God's love for us and our human love for one another are all of one piece. They cannot be separated. The Bible says this over and over again. Here are a few examples from the first letter of John: "Little children, let us love, not only in word and speech, but in truth and action.... Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent the only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that God loves us and sent the Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and God's love is perfected in us.... Those who say, 'I love God' and hate any other human being are liars; those who do not love others whom they have seen cannot love God, whom they have not seen."

So, on this Mother's Day, the best way to honor your mother, and any of the other people who have been like a mother to you, is to love others — and that can be people you've never even thought about. Remember, Jesus said, "I have other sheep who do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also." Amen.