Sunday, May 13, 2001
THE MOTHER LOVE OF GOD
John 13:31-35

My mother died suddenly almost 31 years ago in August 1970. Because of the cause of her death, a cerebral hemorrhage, it was not possible for her to give us some final words of advice before she died. We were at her bedside, but she was unconscious. I have often wondered what her final words would have been.

This question is on my mind this Mother's Day because of the story we read from the gospel of John, where Jesus gathers his disciples in the upper room for a final meal. Judas is the only one absent. He has left the room after supper to betray his teacher. Like a loving mother on her deathbed, Jesus said to the remaining eleven disciples, "Little children, I am with you only a little longer. Here's what I always want you to remember and to do. It's my most important advice to you. Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another."

This conversation sounds like a young mother bidding farewell to her children. Gathered around her bed in a crumbling farmhouse, the younger ones, wide-eyed, are clutching their dolls, and the older ones are trying to be brave but are unable to keep an occasional tear from spilling and washing wet tracks down their dirty cheeks.

"My dear children," says the young mother, "Soon you will look for me, but where I am going you cannot come now."

Even the youngest ones sense that something memorable and mysterious is about to take place. The tears begin to flow freely. The baby drops her rattle and begins to cry.

The young mother then says, "The advice I am giving you now is more important than anything I have ever said to you. Love one another. Take care of each other. And remember that I love you and will continue to love you. I won't be around to take care of you much longer. Watch out for each other. Love each other. Promise?"

I don't know if this is what my mother would've said or not. All of us were adults and had children of our own, so her words would've been a little different. She probably would've told us to love our children in the same way she loved us.

Every time I remember my mother's love, I am reminded of God's love. Although we most often think of God's love in terms of a father's love, God's love, as Jesus described it and lived it, is also like a mother's love.

I've said it before, and I need to say it again. In my spiritual journey, it is frequently helpful for me to imagine God as a loving mother, in addition to thinking of God as a loving father. Sometimes when I say the Lord's Prayer, I substitute the word "mother" for "father" in the opening phrase: "Our Mother who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name."

And there's that old hymn which is one of my favorites, Faith of Our Fathers. Last week I found myself singing to myself and noticed that line. I was singing, "Faith of our mothers, living still." I suppose it was my way of looking ahead to this Mother's Day sermon.

Changing the metaphor from time to time helps me to remember that in thinking about God and talking with God, we human beings use metaphors, and no metaphor is perfect. We use them to make God more personal and understandable.

A friend of mine who is a Roman Catholic priest told me that he believes one of the reasons that Mary, the mother of Jesus, is so important in his tradition is that she is a reminder that God's love is not limited to fatherhood but includes the nurturing aspects of motherhood as well.

Kathleen Norris, in her book Amazing Grace, makes the same point. Although she is a member of a Protestant Church, she said that for years, Mary, the mother of Jesus, was more or less invisible to her. Along with the angels of the Nativity, Mary was one of the decorations her family unpacked every year for Christmas. She was a strange but welcome seasonal presence who would be relegated to the closet again at the New Year. However, as her faith continued to mature, Kathleen says she has become aware that Mary is important to her because she helps enlarge her understanding of God's love.

Along the way, she was surprised to learn from her study of the Bible that the lovely Magnificat she sang in the choir—"My soul magnifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior"—was the song of Mary in Luke's story of the events surrounding the birth of Jesus. It was one woman's response to a blessing from another.

Equally important, the words of the Magnificat are a poetic rendering of a theme that pervades the entire Biblical narrative. When God comes into our midst, it is often to upset the status quo. Indeed, for some of us, to think of God using feminine metaphors can be unsettling. But it is good, because in many ways God's love for us is very much like that of a mother's love for her children.

I read a story about an experience in O'Hare Airport that illustrates this. It was wintertime. A man had gone to the airport to meet someone. It was a gloomy Chicago day, and he was feeling lonely and depressed. As he waited in the airport, he noticed a young mother cradling a baby in her arms. The look on this mother's face was filled with adoration and love. She couldn't take her eyes off the child as she held the baby close. He kept watching her. After a time, she looked up, smiled, and then returned to looking at her baby. He said it was the most beautiful and loving smile he could remember. His mood was lifted. That evening, he was having dinner with his friends. They noticed the joy in him and asked him what happened. He said, "Today at the airport, I saw the Madonna. Today at the airport, I saw the love of God in a mother and her baby."

And yet the celebration of Mother's Day is not easy for everyone. I am thinking of women I know who have wanted very much to be a mother but have not been able to for one reason or another. I am also thinking of those mothers who have had one or more of their children precede them in death. Mary, the mother of Jesus, had this experience. Yet there's one thing we all have in common, whether or not we have been a mother. We all have a mother, some of us more than one. I know people who have a biological mother and an adoptive mother. There are those who have a biological mother and also a stepmother. My birth mother died years ago, but my stepmother is 99. And we have other people who loved and cared for us like a mother even though they were not related.

To those mothers who have lost a child in death, I can only say, if you're looking for an answer this Mother's Day on why your child died before you did, there is no satisfactory answer. I only

know that there are many mothers who have known deep sorrow because they experienced the joy of carrying a child in their womb and then lost it to miscarriage, accident, disease, war, or some other catastrophe. I know this because my mother lost her youngest child at age 10 because of a brain tumor. I watched her and my dad suffer and grieved along with them, as did my brother and sisters.

Here's part of what Erma Bombeck wrote on this issue for a Mother's Day column years ago:

"Motherhood isn't just a series of contractions. It's a state of mind. From the moment we know life is inside of us, we feel a responsibility to protect and defend that human being. It's a promise we can't keep."

"We beat ourselves to death over a pledge. 'If I hadn't worked through the eighth month.' 'If I had taken him to the doctor when he had a fever.' 'If I hadn't let him use the car that night.' 'If I hadn't been so naive, I'd have known he was on drugs.' The longer I live, the more convinced I become that surviving changes us. After the bitterness, the anger, the guilt, and the despair are tempered by time, we look at life differently."

In her book, I Want To Grow Hair, I Want To Grow Up, I Want To Go To Boise, Bombeck talks with mothers who had lost a child to cancer. Every single one said death gave their lives new meaning and purpose. And who do you think prepared them for the rough, lonely road they had to travel? Their dying child. They pointed their mothers toward the future and told them to keep going. Their children had already accepted what their mothers were fighting to reject."

"The children in the bombed-out nursery in Oklahoma City have touched more lives than they will ever know. Workers who had probably given little thought to anything that morning are making calls home during the day to say to their children, 'I love you.'"

"This may seem like a strange Mother's Day column on a day when joy and life abound for the millions of mothers throughout the country. But it's also a day of appreciation and respect. I can think of no mothers who deserve it more than those who had to give a child back."

"In the face of adversity, we are not permitted to ask, 'Why me?' You can ask, but you won't get an answer. Maybe you are the instrument who is left behind to perpetuate the life that was lost."

"The late Gilda Radner summed it up well: 'I want a perfect ending. Now I've learned the hard way that some poems don't rhyme and some stories don't have a clear beginning, middle, and end. Life is about not knowing, having to change, taking the moment and making the best of it without knowing what is going to happen next. Delicious ambiguity.'"

In spite of tragedy, the truth remains: God's love is like that of a mother for her children, and we are to love each other in the same way.

This is easier said than done. It's easy to advocate love in general, but when you get specific, it's more problematic. In another place in the Bible, when Jesus said that we are to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves, someone asked him, "Who is my neighbor?" When he defined "neighbor" in the parable of the Good Samaritan as someone you would never even think of associating with in any way, some of his listeners were not so sure about loving their neighbors.

It's not as easy as it sounds. It all depends on your definition of "neighbor" and your understanding of love. When Jesus talked about love, he was defining it as something much more than emotional feeling or even being a close friend with someone, although that can be included.

He was also talking about action, about treating people with respect and dignity. He was talking about not being afraid to cross many of the artificial boundaries we create. When the Samaritan stopped to take care of the injured Jew by the roadside, he was crossing a boundary that was taboo. He was touching someone he was not supposed to touch.

When he said, "Love one another as I have loved you," he was describing action. When people who risk their own lives to save another are asked how they "felt" about what they were doing while they were doing it, the reply is usually, "I felt nothing."

Here's a stranger who helped pull three children out of a burning house. He said, "I didn't even think about it. It was happening so fast, and I knew we had to get them out of there." Here's a mother who lifts a tree off her son's leg: "I didn't even notice how heavy it was until I put it down." When love of this kind takes over completely, it is expressed through actions, not feelings. You do not gradually and cautiously feel your way toward a loving action.

Mother's Day. Love in action is the force behind all those meals mom prepared, all those good-night books read to sleepy and not-so-sleepy children by a tired mom. Mothers do all these things and more even when they don't especially feel like doing them.

So today we celebrate the mother-love of God, which we all have experienced through the love of our own mothers and from many people who loved us as if they were our mothers.

The perfect mother does not exist in this life, and I am glad for that, nor does the perfect child. No child could stand her or get free from her. But the mother of whom you can say she loved you the best she knew how, for that mother, you and I are grateful.

Thanks be to God for my mother and for mothers everywhere, and thanks be to God for loving us like a mother. Amen.