Sunday, May 12, 2002
WHO IS MY MOTHER?
Matthew 12:46-50

One reason Mother's Day is cherished by many people 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 that being a biological mother automatically confers some special merit on a woman. A woman I've known for years, who is the mother of nine children, told me that when people meet her for the first time and ask about her family and then discover that she and her husband have nine children, they often make comments filled with admiration. She said to me, "I'm pleased and proud to have these children, and I think being a good mother is one of the most important roles I could ever fill, but there is nothing especially meritorious about their conception. The existence of nine children in and of itself is no evidence that I am especially suited for motherhood." She went on to say that having nine children is no great achievement in and of itself. Mothers with nine children are not necessarily nine times as loving as those with one child.

There are so many different kinds of mothers in our world: single mothers, stepmothers, adoptive mothers, mothers-in-law, grandmothers, neighborhood mothers, and surrogate mothers. There are even times when many women not related to you try to be your mother, and some of them make very good mothers.

"Who is my mother?" According to the story in Matthew's Gospel, that's the question Jesus asked: "Who is my mother?"

One day while he was teaching, his mother and his brothers tried to get a message to him through the crowd. Why his mother wanted to speak to him personally, we do not know.

Some Biblical commentators have suggested that she was worried about the growing opposition to his ministry. Being a good Jewish mother, she wanted Jesus to come back home with her so she could protect him. Other Biblical scholars have suggested that Mary's husband, Joseph, had died, and Mary was now a single mother. Since Jesus was the oldest son, she hoped to persuade him to come back home and be the head of the family. That would also make him less vulnerable to his enemies.

When the message was given to him that his mother wanted to speak with him, he used it as a teaching opportunity. He said to those around him, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" Then he answered his own question: "Whoever does the will of God is my mother, brother, and sister." In other words, we are to be mothers, sisters, and brothers to each other, and that means we are to be loving, caring people.

I have become more and more intrigued with the idea that Mary had become a single mother. To be a single mother is to be in a very difficult situation. And yet, in spite of the bad press often given them, in addition to Mary, there have been many heroic single mothers, and there have also been some non-heroic ones.

Judge Robert Van Pelt was a long-time member of this congregation until he died in 1988. I was privileged to be his pastor for 16 years, and we became close friends. U.S. Chief Justice

Warren Burger said, “This man is one of the greatest jurists in this country.” President Eisenhower appointed him as a United States District Judge in 1957, and he served in that office until his death at age ninety on April 27, 1988.

I did not know until a few months ago that he was raised by a single mother. Robert Van Pelt was born on September 9, 1897, in West Muddy Precinct, Gosper County, Nebraska, right next to Frontier County. During most of the 1890s, Robert’s parents, Sarah and Francis Van Pelt, lived in a sod dugout on an eighty-acre timber claim in southeast Frontier County. In the spring of 1897, Sarah informed Francis that she was expecting a child. His response was that they were too poor to support themselves, let alone a child. Shortly thereafter, he left, never to return. Sarah went to the home of her sister, Amanda, where the family assisted in Robert’s delivery. Not long after, Sarah purchased a building in Stockville, Nebraska, where she operated the Stockville House, a boarding house and restaurant near the Courthouse Square across the street from the community windmill. For more than thirty years, Sarah Van Pelt supported herself and her son without any outside assistance.

Even though she had very little formal education, Sarah knew the value of education. Robert Van Pelt attended the Stockville Public School through the tenth grade, Franklin Academy from 1912-1914, and Doane College from 1916 to 1920. He graduated from the Nebraska Law School in 1922. He practiced law in Lincoln for 35 years. For four years during that period, he was assistant United States District Attorney. As mentioned earlier, President Eisenhower appointed him a United States District Judge in 1957, and he served in that office until his death at age 90 on April 27, 1988. He never forgot how important his single mother was in his life. He enjoyed telling about his mother’s send-off when he went to college. She said, “Always tell the truth, Robert, because they can’t take that from you, and always be clean because soap is cheap.”

Stockville is still the County Seat of Frontier County. It has a population of 32 and has the only existing wooden frame courthouse in the state, and maybe the nation. It was built in 1889. It has the distinction of being the last courthouse in the nation to get indoor plumbing in the 1960s. When Frontier County put running water in the courthouse, a major item before the commissioners was whether to install a drinking fountain in the downstairs hall. The County Clerk opposed the $65.00 fountain expenditure as a waste of taxpayer funds. After all, he provided a pail of water with a dipper for anyone who was thirsty. The commissioners approved the fountain because the County Clerk’s dog also drank from the bucket.

Incidentally, Robert Van Pelt not only grew up there but tried his first case as a young attorney in the Stockville Courthouse. Stockville continues to take pride in its colorful history, its strong pioneers, and the many notable people who have lived there, including Former Governor of Nebraska Frank B. Morrison, who is a member of this church and who began his law practice there.

There are so many heroic mothers, and many of them raised their children as single mothers. Lance Armstrong, the world-class bicyclist, was born when his mother was 17 years old. Although Linda, his mother, was married and divorced twice, Lance remembers being raised almost completely by her when she was single, and he credits his determination and success to his mother. In his book, he says this about his mother: “My mother had given me more than any teacher or father figure ever had, and she had done it over some long, hard years, years that must have looked as empty to her at times as those brown Texas fields. When it came to never quitting, to not caring how it looked, to gritting your teeth and pushing to the finish, I could only hope to have the stamina and fortitude of my mother, a single woman with a young

son and a small salary: and there was no reward for her at the end of the day, either, no trophy or first-place check. For her, there was just the knowledge that honest effort was a transforming experience and that her love was redemptive. Every time she said, 'Make an obstacle an opportunity, make a negative a positive,' she was talking about me, I realized; about her decision to have me and the way she had raised me."

Another heroic single mother is Ruth McBride. Her story is told by one of her sons, James McBride, in a best-selling book from a few years ago, The Color of Water. The subtitle is: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother.

Ruth was born in Poland in 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. Because of her abusive father, at age 19, Ruth 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 extreme 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. He also died prematurely, and now she had 12 children to raise as a single mother.

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. Here's a quotation from the book: "As a boy, I never knew where my mother was from, where she was born, or 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. When we'd ask her, 'What color is God?' she'd answer, 'The color of water.' When we'd ask her, 'What color are we?' All she would answer was, 'You're a human being.'"

After all her 12 children were raised, Ruth went to college and graduated in 1986 from Temple University in Philadelphia, where she received a degree in Social Work at age 65. Now she spends all of her time working among the poor and disadvantaged.

However, not all mothers are heroic, whether they are single or married. Here's one more story of a different kind. One day, not too many years ago, a young woman gave birth to a baby boy in a hospital in Cincinnati. When she was asked to give the baby a name, there was no father to consult; in fact, she wasn't even sure who the father was. She told the nurse, "He ain't got no name." The nurse said something had to be put on the birth certificate. "I'm tired," the mother said. "Can I go back to sleep now?"

The nurse returned to her station and wrote "No-name" on the birth certificate. That's how this little boy's life began. He came into the world as No-Name Manson. By the time he was nine or ten, No-name figured out that his mother was a prostitute. When he was old enough to run away, he disappeared into the underside of the world and stayed hidden for a long time.

Then suddenly, he surfaced — this time in the newspapers on the West Coast. Only now, he had a name, one that he had given himself, and the press had passed it along to the whole world: Charles. Charles Manson; running all over California, trying to kill his mother.

You might think this is an odd story to add to the others on Mother's Day. But the fact is, when the love we celebrate this day is conspicuously absent, the results can be terrible. And when that love is present, it is holy. There's an old spiritual whose words are: "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child." What does that feel like? I do not know. Most of you don't know. And you would all agree that whatever it feels like, it certainly doesn't mean you should grow up and become a murderer. This can never be used to excuse that kind of behavior. Yet we do know that having a loving mother is crucial in helping us to become the best that we can be.

When Robert Van Pelt was born, when Lance Armstrong was born, when each of Ruth McBride's twelve children came into the world, these mothers had no difficulty supplying a name for the birth certificate. When I was born at home, 71 years ago last month, the second of 7 children, my mother had no trouble knowing what to put on the birth certificate. I also know that all of us, her seven children, never doubted that we were loved.

On September 9, 1897, in a little house in West Muddy Precinct, Gosper County, Nebraska, a single woman named Sarah gave birth to a little baby boy, and she knew exactly what to name him. There was no father to consult. He had deserted his wife months earlier. But she was a strong woman, a woman of faith, and she knew that she could name him and raise him all by herself. When it was time to fill out the birth certificate, the mother, whose name was Sarah Van Pelt, proudly said, "Robert." I do not know this, but I imagine this mother was thinking, "Robert is a name that brings with it the promise of greatness. And this baby is going to need all the love and support that I can give. It's not going to be easy, being a single mom. But I can do it." That night, in her sleep, she dreamed about her son, and everything she hoped for him. But most of all, that he would always love her. And himself. And he did.

Who is my mother? Hopefully, each one of you has many mothers — many people who care about you and love you. And no matter who you are, you can be a mother to others. Being a mother, in the Christian understanding of the term, is not limited to those who have children of their own or who have adopted children. In God's creation, you do not escape motherhood because you have no children of your own, whether you are male or female. To do the will of God, according to Jesus, is to practice the love of God and neighbor by being a loving mother, brother, or sister to others, and that means to love them as God loves you. Amen.