Sunday, May 11, 2003
MOTHER POWER
John 10:11-18

I must've had "Mother's Day" on my mind because last Tuesday morning, I woke up at 4:00 a.m., and the first question that came to me was about "Mother's Day." What would be a good sermon title? Then the answer came to me from somewhere—"MOTHER POWER." Sermons and their titles can have weird origins.

At 4:00 a.m., your mind can do strange things because then I could see myself in Memorial Stadium at a Nebraska home football game. I saw the cheerleaders at work, but instead of holding up signs to the east stadium seats that said "HUSKER," the signs said "MOTHER." On the other side of the stadium, the cheerleaders' signs said "POWER." The crowd, led by the cheerleaders, was shouting antiphonally—"MOTHER!"—"POWER!"

Then I wondered what would happen if, in the church services on Mother's Day weekend, we had ushers acting as cheerleaders on each side of the church with signs that said, MOTHER! POWER! And I saw the congregation cheering back and forth.

Next, I began to recall all the stories in the Bible about powerful mothers and how they changed the world. I remembered Hagar, the mother of Ishmael. Ishmael's father was Abraham. She had to raise her son as a single mother because Abraham was married to another woman. Then there was Sarah, the mother of Isaac, also a child of Abraham. I recalled Rebekah, the mother of Esau and Jacob; then Leah, the mother of some of the sons and daughters of Jacob, and Rachel, another mother of some of the children of Jacob, and also Zilpah and Bilhah, who also had children with Jacob. The 12 sons of Jacob from these four mothers became the leaders of the 12 tribes of Israel.

I remembered the mother of Moses, who saved his life by placing him in a special waterproof basket and letting him float on the river, and then she helped raise him when Pharaoh's daughter found him. Unfortunately, her name is not mentioned, as is true of many powerful mothers then and now. Their names have been long forgotten or never known, but their power lives on. Then I remembered Hannah, the mother of Samuel, who became one of the great prophets, and I recalled Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, and Mary, the mother of Jesus. Talk about "Mother Power"—the Bible is filled with such stories.

Whenever I hear the name, Sarah, I think of the mother of Judge Robert Van Pelt, one of the most distinguished Federal District Judges in our country. He was a long-time member of this church along with his wife, Mildred, and his daughter and son. I told the story of that Sarah in a previous Mother's Day sermon because she was a power mother.

Here in brief is the story again. Robert Van Pelt was born on September 9, 1897, in West Muddy Precinct, Gosper County, Nebraska, next to Frontier County. Sarah and her husband, Francis Van Pelt, lived in a sod dugout in western Nebraska. One day, Sarah told Francis that she was pregnant. He responded by stating they did not have enough money for a child. Shortly thereafter, he left Sarah, never to return.

Sarah went to the home of her sister, Amanda, where the family assisted with the delivery. After Sarah had her child, she moved to Stockville, Nebraska, the county seat of Frontier County, where she bought an old house and turned it into a boarding house. There, as a single

mother for more than 30 years, she raised her son, Robert. He went to Doane College, then to law school, became a lawyer, and then a distinguished Federal District Judge. He never forgot how important his single mother was in his life. He especially enjoyed telling about his mother's advice when he left for college. She said, "Always tell the truth, Robert, because no one can take that from you, and always be clean because soap is cheap." That's "mother power."

Mother power! Although Mary, the mother of Jesus, was not a single mother when Jesus was born, many biblical scholars believe that Joseph, Mary's husband, died when Jesus was 14 or 15 years old, and the stories in the Bible indicate that he had four brothers and two sisters who were younger. I am convinced that Mary was a power mother.

I also believe that Jesus understood his mother as being like a shepherd in some ways, like how God is like a shepherd. 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 that do not belong to this fold." Most mothers, like the good shepherd, would lay down their life for their children.

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 or foster children. In God's creation, you do not escape motherhood because you are not a birth mother. You do not escape motherhood because you are male. Jesus said, "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold." To do the will of God, according to Jesus, is to practice the love of God and neighbor by being a loving mother, father, brother, or sister to others, even those who have been excluded, who are not sheep in your fold — and that means loving them as God loves you.

Jesus no doubt also knew the 23rd Psalm: "The Lord is my shepherd." I am convinced he could recite that beloved psalm from memory. A shepherd, whether male or female, has "mother power" in relation to the sheep in his or her care.

Even though most of you in today's urban society have never seen or met a shepherd, and you probably don't think of yourself as sheep, it can be comforting to think of God as a shepherd and to think of motherhood as being like a shepherd.

Try this sometime. Recite the 23rd Psalm and substitute 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." As I remember my mother as I was growing up, these words are very descriptive. And maybe I was more like a sheep than I wanted to admit.

I am convinced that my understanding of God as being like a shepherd has come, in large part, because of my mother being like a shepherd. I realize that I've told you some of these stories before about my mother, but I want to repeat a few of them in this sermon because they are so precious to me, and my hope is they will prompt you to recall some good memories about your mothers and their mother power.

I need to begin by noting that no mother is perfect, just as no shepherd is perfect. I also want to remind you that all people have more than one person who fills the role of mother.

I had my birth mother until I was 39 years old, and then she died. I've had a stepmother for another 32 years; she is now 101 years old. 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, an aunt, or even an older sister. You've all had people in your lives who were shepherd mothers and had mother power in one way or another.

My birth mother died suddenly almost 33 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, and her mother was a twin. My mother had seven children — four daughters and three sons — and experienced the pain of having her youngest child die at age 10.

She had "mother power." Early in life, 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 where she lived went to high school.

Because there were no school buses, and she lived on a farm far from town, she and her sister rented a room in town during the school year, as did some other rural students. Upon graduating 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.

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

Even where 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 many 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 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."

There are people who welcome Mother's Day with unreserved feelings of gratitude, affection, and celebration. Others view the day with ambivalence or even wish that 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 mothers, and many mothers wonder what their continuing obligation is to their children.

Today, regardless of your relationship with your birth mother, adoptive mother, grandmother, mother-in-law, stepmother, or whoever else has been a mother to you, I invite you to think of those persons as being like a shepherd. I also encourage you to think of what you learned from your mother and how that has affected your understanding of God.

Mother power! Being a mother is a 24-hour-a-day job. There was 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 time on the internet catching up on current events. At the dinner, she found herself next to a distinguished guest. They had a good time conversing. She was doing very well and enjoying herself immensely 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.

Mother power! It's no accident that the Christian Church is most often talked about in feminine terms — Mother Church. When the church is functioning at its best, it has mother power. Today's worship service included the sacrament of infant baptism. Among other things, baptism tells us that we are all children of God. We also promise as a congregation to receive this child into our love and care, to uphold the parents in the fulfillment of their vows, and to provide for all children full opportunities for Christian growth and nurture. The congregation promises to be a mother to the child who has been baptized.

Years ago, in another church, I had baptized a baby in the church service. After the service, I noticed a woman sitting alone. She was crying softly. In our conversation, she told me about a new grandson, and she was thinking about his baptism. I told her to have her daughter give the church office a call to arrange for it. Then she said, "My daughter isn't married. She's only eighteen, and the father of the child wants nothing to do with the baby. She's too embarrassed to call the church, but she wants the child to be baptized." "Have her call me directly, and I'll make the arrangements," I said. The following week, her daughter called, and a date was set.

In the baptism ceremony, I asked for volunteers in the congregation to stand and be the godparents of the child. At first, only a few stood, but then the whole congregation got to its feet. On that day, the congregation showed its mother power! Thank God for God's mother power and for the mother power we have all received from the many mothers in our lives. Amen.