Sunday, May 9, 2004
MOTHER LOVE
John 13:31-35

The celebration of Mother's Day, the second weekend in May, is a beautiful time for some and a very difficult time for others. There is the disappointment of some women who have wanted to be a mother yet never will be. There are others who have only bad memories of their mothers and still others who grieve for mothers who are no longer alive and are sorely missed. There are mothers who are very proud of their children and who enjoy a loving continuous relationship with them, and there are children who are very proud of their mothers and want to honor them. There are single mothers who carry on heroically, and others who are worn down. There are also mothers who have no contact with their children. There are mothers who have abandoned their children, and children who have abandoned their mothers.

I've seen research which reveals a surprising fact about adults in this country. Many adults who were interviewed reported that their most troublesome relationship was still between them and their mothers. Even where the adults were living at a distance from their mothers or where mothers had died, the study revealed a basic conflict between the desire to be independent of a mother's influence and the desire to affirm their mother and to see her as an equal.

The fact remains that you would not have the gift of life were it not for the mother who gave birth to you. Hopefully, you can also be grateful for the many other women and men who fulfilled a mothering role in your life. So regardless of your relationship with your biological mother, I hope you are thankful today for the gift of life which came from your mother. I also hope you are thankful for the "mothering" love of God which is available for everyone.

It's also helpful, especially as you grow older and look back, to have a sense of humor about your mother and what she taught you. Here's a brief list of what one person said her mother taught her. "My mother taught me logic: 'If you fall off that swing and break your neck, you can't go to the store with me.' My mother taught me medicine: 'If you don't stop crossing your eyes, they're going to freeze that way.' My mother taught me intuition: 'Put your sweater on. Don't you think that I know when you're cold?' My mother taught me to meet a challenge: 'What were you thinking? Answer me when I talk to you... Don't talk back to me.' My mother taught me genetics: 'You are just like your father.' My mother taught me about anticipation: 'Just wait until your father gets home.' My mother taught me about justice: 'One day you'll have children, and I hope they turn out just like you. Then you'll see what it's like.'"

In the reading for today, Jesus is having one of his final conversations with his disciples. Like a loving mother on her deathbed, Jesus gives some final advice for his disciples to remember. "Little children, I am with you only a little longer. If you remember nothing else after I'm gone, remember this: in the same way that I have loved you, you also are to love one another."

As I read these words again this week in preparation for this sermon, his words sounded like a mother telling her children goodbye and giving them her final words as she is preparing to die. Here's the way I pictured the scene. Gathered around her bed in a farmhouse, the younger children sense that something is dreadfully wrong, but they have no understanding of the finality of death. The older children are doing their best to be brave.

With a brave smile and a trembling voice, the mother says, "Dear children, I love you more than you will ever know. I won't be here to take care of you much longer. You will have to take

care of each other, watch out for each other, and most of all, love each other as best as you can. I want you to love each other as I have loved you. Promise?"

As a parent, whether mother or father, what would be your final words to your children as you were preparing to die? Although she didn't have the opportunity because she died suddenly and unexpectedly, I am convinced my mother would've said something like this: "There's one thing I want you to remember above all else after I die. Love one another. Although I have made mistakes and I know I could have done better, I have done the best I could to love you. I want you to do the same for your children."

Of course, all this advice about loving one another is easier said than done. It's easy to advocate love in general, but when you get specific, it's much more difficult. When Jesus said that you are to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself, someone asked, "Who is my neighbor?" When Jesus defined "neighbor" in the story of the Good Samaritan as being someone you would never even think of associating with in any way, some of his listeners were not so sure that they wanted to love their neighbor or would be able to love their neighbor.

Part of the problem can be with your definition and understanding of love. Love as Jesus defined it is more than an emotional attachment. It is more than a feeling. The Good Samaritan gave aid to the injured Jew in the ditch because he needed help. Love of neighbor did not require that he enter into a close personal relationship with the injured man.

When Jesus told his disciples to love one another as he had loved them, he meant they were to treat each other, and even those they considered their enemies, with justice and compassion. He was talking about love in action, about treating other people with decency and respect. He was also talking about crossing many of the artificial boundaries we create. Love is action. When people who have just performed some heroic, life-threatening deed in order to save someone they did not personally know are asked how they "felt" about what they were doing while they were doing it, the reply is usually, "I did not have any feeling. I was only doing what I knew needed to be done."

It is not always easy to love your children. Some days you are not even sure you like your children. Yet you go on doing what needs to be done, even when you don't necessarily feel like it. All children know that there are times when you are not sure you like your mother. That's when you need to remember that love, as Jesus defined it, is more than a feeling or an emotion.

It's also helpful to remember that no mother's love is perfect. No father's love is perfect. Yet, even when your children are adults, most of you want the best for them, and sometimes what you think would be the best for them may not be. There's that wonderful story in the gospel of Matthew about the "sons of thunder," who became two of the early disciples of Jesus.

According to the story, one day their mother came to make a request to Jesus on their behalf. She said, "Promise me that my two sons will sit on your right hand and your left hand. I want them to have the highest places of honor when you come into your kingdom."

Had the two sons asked their mother to make this request? No one knows. Either way, she wanted what most mothers want: the best for her children. Jesus didn't criticize her for that. Instead, he spoke to the sons who were standing next to her. He told them, "Whoever wishes to be great among you must become a servant of all."

Most of the mothers I've known and that you have known would give up their life to save one or more of their children. There's that well-known story in the Old Testament in which King Solomon depends on a mother's love as he settles a dispute between two women, both of whom claim to be the mother of a baby. Two women were living in the same house. They gave birth to children within days of each other. Several weeks later, during the night, one mother discovered that her child had died, so she took the other woman's living child and, in its place, put her child who had died.

Both women presented their side of the story to King Solomon. "When I got up in the morning to nurse my child, I noticed the child I thought was mine, because it was in my bed, was dead. When I examined the child more carefully, I knew it was not my child at all. It was the child of the other woman, and she had exchanged it for mine." The king was asked to decide the case. Who is the real mother of the living child? How can he tell? By testing the strength of the mother's love.

"Bring me a sword," he said calmly, "and I will have the living child cut in two and will give half to each of you." Now the true mother of the living child protested, "Please, my king, give her the living child." But the other woman coldly responded, "It shall neither be yours nor mine; divide it." Now the king knew the true mother. It was the woman who was willing to give up her child to save its life. Her identity was revealed by her love.

I want to conclude this Mother's Day sermon by quoting from a eulogy that David R. Cook delivered at the funeral of his mother, Nelle Reed Cook, because it has something to say about many of our mothers, their struggles, and their love for us, and our love for them.

"Mother's life was a testimony to struggle to rise above the limitations of her childhood.

She remembered her father saying to her as a little girl, with a snap of his fingers, 'You aren't worth five cents.' But her father was a man of honesty, respected in his community and loyal to his family... and before he died many years ago, he apologized to her and asked for forgiveness. He did the best he knew."

"But mother suffered a life-long insecurity about her core sense of self-worth. I believe it was that insecurity that led her to be such a controlling person. She was not an easy person to live with. All of us children and many of the grandchildren have felt at one time or another the frustration, the sting of her personality."

"I tell you these things at her funeral because to honor and celebrate her life means to celebrate and honor all of it. Our parents invested us with a deep sense of honesty and integrity. Honesty makes it important to me that my mother not simply be regarded as a saint, as I'm sure some people feel she is. Though such a thought does honor to mother's memory, to make her a saint in some sense diminishes her considerable humanity."

"The religion of mother's childhood was a dark, vindictive, and judgmental religion that did not seem to hold much in the way of redemption and grace. When in the middle of her life she began to encounter a different vision of God, personified for her in Christ Jesus, it began a healing process in her, and she gradually came to understand her true value and worth as a child of God."

“She tried to live her life, especially the last twenty-five years, in tune with the infinite. She sought God’s guidance on all matters in her life. Nothing was excluded from this, and while this could make for some frustrating feelings in dealing with her, what seems remarkable to me is how often her guidance made sense, how often the pieces fell together.”

“The perfect mother and the perfect father do not exist in this life, and I am glad for that. No child could stand them or get free from them. But the mother of whom you can say she loved you unconditionally, she gave you a sense of purpose in life, and she showed you what it means to live faithfully, to age courageously, and to die at peace with herself — that is all the mother of any child could hope for. That is the mother we had. Thank you, mother, for being just who you were, and thanks be to God for her life.”

I want to add my thanks to God for my mother for giving me the gift of life, and for mothers everywhere, and I encourage you to do the same. I also am grateful to God for loving me and all of you like a mother. Amen.