Sunday, May 8, 2005
MOM
Acts 1:6-14

There's a strange contradiction in the language of Christians. The church is frequently called the "body of Christ." At the same time, it is usually spoken of in feminine terms, that is, feminine pronouns are used. The first verse of the hymn "The Church's One Foundation" begins: "The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord. She is his new creation ..."

If the church can be described in feminine terms, I also believe you can take one more step and speak of the church as "mother" or "mom." It's a fitting metaphor for the following reasons. To be a mother involves pregnancy, and there are aspects of being a mother that describe you as a Christian, whether you are a mother, father, or have no children.

To be pregnant is to be an active partner in creation and the development of new life. It is significant that at one point in his ministry, Jesus used the metaphor of birth — which results from pregnancy — as a way of describing what it is to become a follower of the way of Jesus. He told an individual that he must be "born anew." As a mother participates in bringing new life, so the church, as the body of Christ, is to bring new life to people.

There is a passage in the prophet Isaiah that uses pregnancy as a symbol for the active love of God because, in this instance, the passage describes God with feminine imagery:

"Hearken to me, O house of Jacob, all the remnant of the house of Israel, who have been borne by me from your birth, carried from the womb. Even to your old age, I shall be the same, and to gray hairs I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save."

How intimate is this relationship between God and you and me. And how clear it is that since God carries you as a pregnant mother carries her child, you rest in the womb of God. Like a mom carries a child, so God carries you.

So, also, the church is to be like a mother — a creative, life-giving, nurturing, caring congregation of people. Like a mother carries a child in pregnancy, so the church is to carry you and others whenever you need to be carried through illness, grief, or other problems in life. As the 23rd Psalm reminds you, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for you are with me."

The church is also like a mother, and to be a follower of Jesus is to be like a mother because being a mother involves sacrifice, suffering, and joy. One mother wrote: "The pain of childbearing is two-fold. There are two kinds of suffering which attend the physical bearing of children into this world. The first is that a woman must make space in her body for the child. She sacrifices personal goods: her shape, hormonal equilibrium, energy, and her freedom to sleep in any position."

"The wonder is that such suffering also contains the sudden spasms of joy and that both should come together. The woman who groans is the same who laughs to feel life within her."

"The second suffering of bearing children is the opposite of the first. Having made space for the baby, she must now empty the space. It does not matter how much she has invested in carrying the child. At the end of approximately nine months, she's asked to give it up, to separate herself from it, to deliver it whole and squalling into existence. 'Get out of me,' her

muscles say, her womb, her leaning forward, her very self says to the infant, 'Get out of me in order to be.'"

Any reasonable person might think that once through this curious drama of love would be enough — to labor at making room and then to labor at emptying it. But the mother is asked to do it all over again.

For now, the child is not in her body but in her life. Again, she sacrifices a host of personal goods to give the child the space to grow. Her schedule is broken a thousand times by the child's untimely needs. Her energies are divided. Her sense of accomplishment is shattered every time she does an endless task, endlessly taken for granted. "Hey, Mom! How come my pants aren't ready yet? Don't I have any clean socks?"

My mom would go to bed early and tired. And so she made space for her seven children. Again, in this suffering and sacrifice, there are spasms of joy. Mom laughs to see her child's emerging life, her child's growing maturity.

This too brings more suffering, sacrifice, and joy. At the child's maturity, she must now birth the child not out of her body but out of her home and into the world as an independent and interdependent human being.

By stages now, she labors to let the young person go. By degrees, she loosens the reins, knowing full well the dangers that can lie ahead, yet fearing the greater danger of clinging to the child too closely forever.

A young man wrote about his memories. "On my first day of school, I panicked and cried and raced back to the car where my mother was. 'Mom, take me home!' I thought she would be happy to see me and to discover my undiminished need for her presence, her love, and protection. But I was surprised when she got out of the car, opened the door on my side, and took me gently by the hand back into the school building. Only now do I realize that my mom loved me enough to make me face the challenges of school."

So being a mother is more than being pregnant and helping to bring new life into the world. It is to be a caring, nurturing individual so that children and young people will become responsible, caring individuals on their own. In that sense, all of you are to be like mothers.

So, too, the church is to do more than help people be born anew. It needs also to help them grow and mature as "followers of the way." As a follower of the way of Jesus, there is a sense in which you are to be pregnant people. Not only do you live in God, but God lives in you. The Apostle Paul described it this way: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me."

I am convinced that Jesus saw the emerging church in his time as being like a mother. There's a story in the gospels where the mother and brothers and sisters of Jesus come to where he is teaching, and the family sends a message through the crowd that they would like to speak with him. He is told, "Your mother and your brothers are wanting to see you." He then said, "Who is my mother, and who are my sisters and brothers?" And then, stretching out his arms, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers and sisters. For whoever does the will of God is my brother, sister, and mother."

He wasn't rejecting his biological family. Rather, he was teaching the importance for all people to be like his mother. Although the Bible stories do not tell you very much about Mary when

Jesus was a young child and young man, we do know that when he became an adult, she listened to his teachings and continued to give him advice. According to one tradition, she was at the foot of the cross when he died. His mother was part of the early congregation of believers after his resurrection. Furthermore, according to the Bible story read today from the book of Acts, she remained an active member of that congregation in Jerusalem.

Listen again to this statement from Acts 1:14, “All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary, the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.” As I was reading this story, it caused me to think of how my mother’s influence continues to be a force in my life and in the life of my sisters and brother, even though she died 35 years ago. And then I keep thinking that this influence and presence must be something like the influence and presence the early followers of Jesus experienced after he was gone from them.

After the death of Jesus on Good Friday and the experience of Easter, there is the testimony of his followers that they experienced his loving presence with them in one place, and then he would disappear and appear again without warning in another place.

Then, after a few weeks, a change took place. No one knows if it happened all of a sudden or gradually. The change was that Jesus was no longer with them in a visible way so that they would say, “There is Jesus over there,” or “Here he is.” He seemed to be with them everywhere and always. He was gone, but he was ever-present. It was as if the power of the risen Christ was now within each one of them and among them, especially when they were gathered together.

What does all of this tell you about the love of God as expressed in Jesus and about the ever-present love of your mother, which is also an expression of God’s love?

First, it reminds you that in someone’s absence, you can begin to see and understand them in a new way. This might sound like a contradiction, so let me explain. It often takes distance in time as well as in space to give you perspective. If you are always very close to an event or person, it’s difficult to see that event or person with a new understanding. You are too close to it. You cannot see the forest because of the trees.

When Lincoln’s Gettysburg address was first delivered, it was characterized by some newspapers as a cheap political harangue that desecrated the soldiers’ graves. But distance has helped us to see it more clearly. When Harry Truman was President of the United States, he was not thought to be much of a leader. Now, from a distance, his stature has grown.

Jesus said more than one time to his followers, “What I am doing now you do not understand, but afterward you will understand.” How true that is of much of life. There are so many things you do not truly understand when you are in the midst of them. Later, in looking back, you get a new appreciation.

Jesus was trying to communicate with his disciples that they were in a close and intimate relationship. He had tried to show them and tell them in many different ways that he and God were intimately connected. He wanted them to understand that if they truly knew him, they would know God, but they did not get it. At the Last Supper, Philip said, “Show us God, and we will be satisfied.”

Jesus answered, “Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me, Philip?” The fact is that being present with another, no matter how close the relationship, does not reveal to you all there is to know about the other. The more experience in living you have, the more you know and sense that knowledge of another person and of God grows over time.

In absence, in distance, in memory, you can come to see another with a new understanding. You are less distracted by each other’s idiosyncrasies, and you are better able to see and understand each other’s inner self. In memory, you are able to be in touch with each other’s spirit. This is true of God, and it is true of your friends, your children, and your mother.

Has it not been true of your experience, as it has been of mine, that only after I was gone from the home where I grew up did I truly begin to appreciate it for what it was? Then I saw my mom and dad in a different light. And now, many years after both of them have died, I see them from a different perspective.

So on this Mother’s Day, in addition to remembering and honoring the mothers who are still living or who live near to us, we also remember and honor those mothers who have died or who live far away, but yet are ever-present. We remember, too, those women who wanted children but never had their own. We remember step-mothers, grandmothers, mothers-in-law, foster mothers, and the many women who have been mothers to us. We also salute the church as our mother, as this body of Christ continues to carry us and give us new birth, and as it helps us to grow and mature so that the Spirit of Christ lives in us. Amen.