Sunday, May 14, 2006
THE CHURCH AND MOTHERS
John 4:7-9,19-21

Recently, I received one of the highest honors ever given to me. A very energetic group of women who are connected to this congregation, that I have been privileged to meet with on the first and third Friday morning of each month at 7:00 a.m., gave me the designation of being an "Honorary Woman." Since many of these women are also mothers and some of them grandmothers, I now also think of myself as being an "Honorary Mother." The more I have thought about it, the more I have come to appreciate it, especially on this Mother's Day. Furthermore, being an honorary woman and an honorary mother helps me remember my mother and what I learned from her. I'll talk more about that later.

Business people tell me that in terms of commercial activity, Mother's Day is the third-largest holiday in the United States. 140 million greeting cards are sold, and 7 billion dollars are spent on gifts, meals, and flowers. A minister colleague told me that his congregation had clear expectations for the second Sunday in May. One woman said to him, "I'm bringing my mother to church on Mother's Day. You can preach a sermon on any subject, but it had better include mother, and it better be good."

Here's something to consider: In addition to the second Sunday in May, everyone has another Mother's Day — the day you were born. Your birthday is the real Mother's Day. All you had to do was show up. Your mother did all the work. It's even called "labor."

I like Mother's Day. It gives the preacher the opportunity to talk about being a parent and the importance of the family. The Bible is realistic on this subject. In the creation stories in Genesis, the first family is a disaster. According to the story, husband and wife lead each other into disobeying God. Each tries to avoid personal responsibility. He blames her. She blames the serpent, and they are thrown out of their home. One of their sons murders his brother in a fit of jealousy.

The Bible is not romantic about families. But it does use many family and parental metaphors. There's an odd contradiction in the language of the Bible and the church. The church is frequently called the "Body of Christ," and at the same time, it is usually referred to in feminine terms. The first verse of the hymn in its original form, "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 spoken of in feminine terms, I believe you can take it one step further and speak of the church as a mother. And if you are a man, you can think of yourself as a follower of the way of Jesus as being an honorary mother and, therefore, by implication, an honorary woman.

To take it one step further, in my spiritual journey, I've found it helpful at times to imagine God as a loving Mother in addition to God as a loving Father. For example, sometimes when I say the Lord's Prayer, I substitute the metaphor "Mother" instead of "Father" in the opening phrase. There's also that old hymn which is one of my favorites, Faith of Our Fathers — last week, I found myself singing it and noticed that I had changed the words of the first 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 and also recalling that I had been made an "Honorary Woman."

Changing the words from time to time helps me remember that when talking about God, human beings use metaphors, and no metaphor is complete or perfect. It's a way to make God more personal and understandable.

Consider now, some of the ways in which the church is like a mother. First, to be a mother involves pregnancy, and there are things about pregnancy that help describe what the church is to be and what you are to be as a member — whether you are male or female, or a mother or 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 means to be a follower of his way. He told an individual that he needed to be born anew. As a mother helps develop new life, so the church as the body of Christ, and you as a member of it, bring new life to people.

"Mother imagery" describing God and the church is found throughout the Bible. Isaiah the prophet uses pregnancy as a symbol for the active love of God toward her people, and I use the pronoun "her" because the passage describes God in feminine terms:

"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 save."

Notice how intimate the relationship is between God and the human beings God created. God carries you as a pregnant mother carries a child. You rest in God in the same way as you rested in your mother's womb and later in her arms. So also, the church is to be like a mother — a creative, life-giving, nurturing, caring body of Christ. As a mother carries a child in pregnancy, so the church is to carry you and others.

Secondly, the church is like a mother, and you as members are honorary mothers because being a mother involves sacrifice, suffering, and joy. A 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 a baby, and in doing that, she sacrifices a host of personal goods — her shape, hormonal equilibrium, energy, her freedom to sleep in any position, beauty (so she sometimes feels), and with these, her self-esteem."

"And 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 nine months, or sooner, 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 was enough. Once to labor at making room; once to labor at emptying it. But the mother is asked to do it all over again."

"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 in which 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 the laundry without gratitude because it is an endless task, endlessly taken for granted. 'Hey, Mom! How come my pants aren't ready yet? Don't I have any clean socks?'"

"Again, in this suffering and in this sacrifice, there are spasms of joy. She laughs to see her child's emerging life, her child's growing maturity. And this too brings more suffering, sacrifice, and joy. At the child's maturity, she must birth the child, not out of her body, but out of her house and into the world, an independent and interdependent being. It doesn't matter how much she invested in raising her child. By stages now, she labors to let the young person go. By degrees, she loosens the reins, knowing full well the dangers to which she sends her child, yet fearing the greater danger of clinging to the child too closely forever. And now her hurt is the hurt that the child will encounter on its own."

So being a mother is more than being pregnant and helping to bring new life into the world; it is about being a caring, nurturing individual. It is also about nurturing children and young people so that they become responsible, caring individuals on their own.

The church has to do more than help people to be born anew — it must also help them grow and mature as Christians so that they, in turn, become caring, nurturing mothers and honorary mothers. I believe that Jesus imagined his followers as being like honorary mothers. In the gospel of Matthew, there's a story about his mother, brothers, and perhaps sisters coming to where he is teaching. They send a message through the crowd that they would like to speak with him. Jesus used the incident as a teaching opportunity. He asked, "Who are my mother, brothers, and sisters?" Then, stretching out his arms, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers and sisters. Whoever does the will of God is my mother, sister, and brother." It's an amazing metaphor. "Whoever does the will of God is my mother, brother, and sister." And what is the ultimate will of God? To love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself.

The letter of I John says it this way: "Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and those who love God are born of God and know God. Those who do not love do not know God, for God is love. We love because God first loved us. If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates another person, you are a liar, for if you do not love others whom you have seen, you cannot love God whom you have not seen. And this commandment you have from Jesus: if you want to love God, you need to love others also." Notice that there are no exceptions to whom you are to love. No exceptions.

This brings me to what I learned from my mother about being an honorary mother. She did her best to love others with no exceptions. Of course, no mother is perfect. 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, gave you a sense of purpose in life, and showed you what it means to live courageously and to die at peace with herself — that is all the mother of any child could hope for. That is the mother my siblings and I had.

I am using my mother as the main illustration here because recently, I came across a research project that revealed a surprising fact about adults in the United States. Most of the people surveyed reported that their most troublesome relationship was between themselves and their parents. The survey did not distinguish between mothers and fathers. This surprised me because it has not been my personal experience.

According to the survey, 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. There is always the tension of maintaining both intimacy and distance.

Read the letters to Dear Abby or Dear Ann Landers, and you can see that many people are struggling to deal with this problem. Here's an example: "Dear Abby: I am 67 years old and I am crazy. I got this way by 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. (Signed) Stuck in Encino."

Thus, some people welcome Mother's Day with unreserved feelings of gratitude, affection, and celebration. Others view the day with ambivalence. They feel obligated to honor their mothers but at the same time have many bad memories. Many adults wonder what their continuing obligation is to their parents and especially their mother.

In addition to loving me and my siblings unconditionally, I also learned from my mother that God is a loving and forgiving God, and human beings are also to be forgiving and loving.

Not only did she continually forgive each one of her seven children, but she also forgave my dad, her husband, and others as well. She was not only forgiving but took positive action to demonstrate her forgiveness. I remember a high school student who was a friend of one of my sisters. This young woman, at age 17, became pregnant and was not married. She wanted to have the baby and keep it. There was a lot of finger-pointing in that little town where we lived. What my mother did was to let the young woman know that God is forgiving by holding a baby shower in our home so that she would have the necessary items to begin her own motherhood.

So on this Mother's Day 2006, we honor the mothers among us, those who are living and those in our memories. We honor all mothers — grandmothers, stepmothers, mothers-in-law, and the many people who have been mothers to us, neighbors, honorary mothers, and relatives. We also honor this church congregation as a mother, as she gives us new birth, carries us, and helps us grow and mature. I hope you will join me in being that kind of honorary mother. Amen.