

May 10, 2015
Falcon Heights Church UCC
Falcon Heights, MN
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Mother's Day
John 15:9-17

THE OBEDIENCE OF LOVE

Preaching on Mother's Day would seem to be a no-brainer. The Sanctuary is fuller than usual and the theme is so *biblical sounding*: sacrificial mother love. Pastors often welcome this opportunity to relate such mother love to the generosity and persistence of God's love for humans, and to the seemingly sacrificial love of Jesus. In spite of the fact that Mother's Day as we know it in the USA is wildly commercialized, and often overly sentimental. One would think this is a natural Sunday to make some homiletical hay about the love theme.

And yet there are a few things that give me pause when it comes to Mother's Day. It's not just the commercial overplay, the crowded restaurants, cloying greeting cards and the wild mix of expectations associated with this day. Over the years, as I have listened to people in my congregations and in my pastoral counseling office, I have learned that relationships with our mothers, mother memories and the experience of mothering are a complicated mix. On Mother's Day we remember that while everyone has literally had a mother, the faith community must recognize that some may have never met that person or have become estranged from her. There are those among us who have mostly happy memories of our mothers. But most of us lose our mothers in death before we ourselves die, and Mother's Day may be a poignant reminder of someone who is now missing in our life. There are those among us for whom the memories of our mother may be a shadowy vagueness at best. At worst, these memories may be filled with deep sadness, or sometimes even with terror and hate. For some among us, Mother's Day is experienced as awkward or downright painful. We do well not to generalize about this tender day, least of all here in the faith community.

To complicate things even more on Mother's Day, there are a wide variety of experiences related to *being or not being a mother*. Joy and grief, missed opportunities and unwanted responsibilities, accomplishment and failure, sin and forgiveness. Regret, surprise, hope. It's all intricately connected to human love and relationship: trying to love, failing to love, being loved, feeling loved, feeling unloved. We claim as Christians that God is love. "Love one another, as I have loved you," commanded Jesus of his followers. Given this complicated context of Mother's Day, what more might we understand about love?

In these final words to his followers at the Last Supper, Jesus has just used the vineyard metaphor to describe the organic unity between God, Jesus and the community of faith. God's loving actions, like an attentive gardener,

prune and shape us. As the branches on the vine, our leafy tendrils draw their sustenance from Jesus, the central branch, which is grounded in God the creator. "Abide in me," says Jesus; and in the following verses, "Abide in my love." Back and forth the imagery is woven, "abide in me," "my words abide in you," "keep my commandments and abide in my love," all pointing towards the purpose of the vine. The vine exists for the bearing of fruit, the works of love that become the mark of faithful community. "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you," says Jesus.

This is mysterious language, symbolic of an unseen reality that permeates who we are as followers of Jesus and as those who try to love other humans. Well along now in of my imperfect life of pastoring and also being a mother, sometimes I get the "love one another" thing right, and sometimes I don't. But this symbolic language of an unseen reality has come to make sense to me: God and the spirit of the Risen Jesus, making their home, abiding with us, in us. The idea here is that they take up residence in us, dwell in us, as we love Jesus and follow his commandments. I find this to be both an awesome idea and also somewhat preposterous: You and I are the home, homes essentially, of the Creator of the Universe. I don't take this to mean we are God's *only* home; what is suggested here is simply that God and the Risen Jesus take up residence in us. How are we to make sense of this? And what difference might this make in our human relationships?

A few years ago, my sister-in-law sent out a Mother's Day email from her home in Pittsburgh to all of us Swallow women. She urged us to visit a website she had been tracking, which followed the nesting habits of two peregrine falcon females in the tall buildings of downtown Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where she lives. Live-streaming Web cams had been placed above each of the two nests and were capturing all the mothering action! "Check this out," wrote Laura. "I look in on these two Mama birds several times a day and I'm rooting for them. Happy Mother's day!" Of course, I quickly logged on to the website, and watched in fascination while a group of five tiny chicks were rolling around on top of each other, *live*, impatiently waiting for the return of their mama bird. Then switching to the Gulf Tower at the U of Pittsburgh, I witnessed the second mother hunkered down over her unhatched eggs, visibly shivering in the blustery wind. Traffic sounds bristled through the microphones. I checked back in on the five chicks. Mom had now returned, and they were all making a quite racket as she bustled around the nest stuffing food into their gaping mouths. After drastic decline in the 1960's, a result of environmental toxins and loss of habitat, these falcons were again making their home among us, were reproducing and mothering.

Thinking about these beautiful and powerful peregrine falcons that had almost disappeared, I reflected on how sometimes we get to a point where our sense of connection with the love of the living God almost disappears, even dies. Perhaps this has happened to you at some time in your life, or maybe even now. That place, that nest within that held a sense of God's compassionate presence

seems to have fallen into disrepair, or it has simply shattered in our hearts. We may find it gets harder to be to have compassion on ourselves. We may get a little more critical, resentful of others. Maybe we can't even imagine God finding a home in us anymore, abiding, nesting within us. Or maybe it seems like this has never even really happened. A home, a nest, in me, for the Creator of the Universe, for the Spirit of the Risen Jesus? Inspired by the best of mother love, is this the way we might learn how to be more loving with one another? Might a form of obedience to God be *daring to let God find a home in us?*

One of my teachers in seminary (Henry Nouwen, the 20th century Catholic priest and theologian) spoke about how we can "slowly build a little nest" of openness for God inside of us, through the practices of prayer. It's as though the words of simple prayer, even a slowly repeated short phrase during our daily round, such as "O God, I need you," or "Jesus, have mercy on me," or "Dear Lord, thank you," build a nest within our hearts. Or as the contemporary writer Anne Lamont suggests, keep it simple with prayers like "Wow." "Help!" "Thanks." These daily, simple prayers "slowly build a little nest for themselves in our heart and stay there for the rest of our busy day," says Nouwen. Even while we are talking, working, driving, cooking dinner, these short prayers "can continue in our heart and keep us aware of God's ever-present guidance." (Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, p. 82)

Maybe this is how we learn to love God: slowly, obediently building this nest inside, stick by twig, fiber by feather, prayer by prayer. A place where God might abide. A nest to receive the living presence of God who so wants to make a loving home within us. God deeply longs to settle in the nest of our hearts and create the new within us. I believe *this is how we become more able to love the humans in our lives*. God is the loving nesting One in our midst. That is the Good News for Mother's Day. Thanks be to God! Amen.