

Sermon 051312 Motherhood

Scripture- John 15: 9-17, Philippians 2: 1-12

Sermon Title- Mother Logic

The First Lady of the United States, Melania Trump, has been unfairly criticized in my view, for not moving into the White House after the inauguration of her husband. She chose to stay in NYC so that her son could continue in the school he is attending. I respect that devotion to her child. This is an example of a mother making difficult decisions around her children.

In seminary, they teach you to avoid having favorite people in your congregation. That is a bunch of hooey. I have favorite people here and I'm not embarrassed to say one of my favorites is Laurie Micheson. We work together in the church office. I always make sure we have visit time so I can talk about what is going on in our lives.

All of us can agree that Laurie and Jamie are doing a great job raising their three exceptional children. But don't think for a minute that what Laurie and so many others do is remotely easy. Motherhood is the toughest job in the world.

Now, I want to be very clear that I do not believe that being a Mom completes a woman. I know women who live fulfilling, satisfying lives that have never been a Mom. Many choose that path. I think of my Aunt Rachael, a Roman Catholic Nun, who we lost around a year ago. She lived an extraordinary life of service to

God that was truly fulfilling. She had the tough job of being the nurse in an orphanage/reform school. She also taught our family how to die well. My family has some very successful people in it, some truly gifted people, but when it comes to being proud to be in someone's family, we start with Aunt Rachael. Sister Rachael Bouchard had one of the most fulfilling lives that I know of and she never had children. She is only one example. Motherhood should never be equated with personhood.

As we all know, there are some perfectly dreadful mothers. There are disinterested mothers, clueless mothers, selfish mothers, and down-right cruel mothers. Like any endeavor in life, there are good ones and there are bad ones and everything in between. Also, some of the best mothers that I have known are men. The qualities that we think of in mothers, nurturing, unconditional love and support are often found in men. It is not the exclusive domain of women.

Yet, when I witness the mothers in my life, both in my personal life and in my ministry, I am profoundly struck by how *damn hard* motherhood is. There is also a tragic loss suffered by women when they are mothers. They lose the human ability of rational thought and logic when it comes to their children. Let me explain.

I had a very bright and good woman come to me recently who was reeling from an argument that she had just had with her adult son. She opened her time with me with the statement, “I have failed as a mother. I have not given my son the foundation for a faith life.” Another Mom who I know to be a loving and giving person has a son who is addicted to prescription drugs. She asked me, “Where did I go wrong?” Why is it that mothers whose children do not turn out to be perfect take responsibility for flaws (real or perceived) that there may be in their children?

This is what I’m talking about when I say that their rational thought and basic logic get somehow removed. Do you actually think that having and raising a child is like building a machine? If you carefully follow the instructions your machine will work and if you don’t, it won’t? We are all born as our unique selves. Some are high energy and some are laid back. Some are very bright and some are not. Some are prone to conflict and some are conflict adverse. Some are prone to addiction and some are not... you know what I’m talking about.

That is not to say that parents and particularly mothers don’t have important roles to play and real effect on their offspring. Of course, they do. You can show your children what it means to love and to be loved. You can teach them what it means to be trustworthy and to be trusting. You can teach them the value of

healthy discipline, a good education, the value of a dollar, and the rewards of a hard day's work. You can show them values like compassion and forgiveness.

You can show them these things but you can't force them to absorb them. They are who they are and they will be what they will be. Parenthood, motherhood is about making mistakes. More importantly, it is about loving.

I think motherhood is about sacrifice. The first thing that is sacrificed is the body. It has to be the strangest experience in the world to have another human being growing inside you. I have been told by pregnant Moms that they are never-not thinking about the baby inside of them. Then, there is the pleasure of childbirth. Okay ladies, have you experienced anything more frightening or more painful? I didn't think so.

Those sacrifices on the part of mothers are only the very beginning of the child's life. The way Moms pour themselves into their kids is humbling. Dad wants to hold the kid high when they win the big game. Mom wants to hold the kid close when they lose.

During our visit time with Laurie in the office, I usually start with, "What's going on?" Invariably, she starts with the kids. Someone is sick, or there's a rehearsal, or a track meet, or a game, or a test. Her focus on the children is extraordinary. Because

Laurie and I work together I get more information from her than others. I recognize great mothering among so many others in our church including my wife, whose children are functioning adults these days. The care, concern, and worrying is different for Meg now, but it's still real and ongoing.

When witnessing Meg with her children and Laurie with hers and so many more of you, I am reminded of a word we learned in seminary. It is a Greek word, "Kenosis." It is a theological term meaning, 'the self-emptying of Christ.' (Phil 2: 7) It captures the notion that our Lord gave all he had, all his wisdom, all his power, all his love, and all his life for us, and our salvation. That and only that level of commitment is what I compare motherly love to, self-emptying. In fact, the passage from Philippians that we heard this morning calls us all to imitate the self-emptying of Christ.

Now, if Jesus Christ had thought rationally about doing what he did for us, do you think he would have done what he did? I don't. Now, think of how Jesus sacrificed all he had on that cross for us. Then think about how *we* all turned out, we who take his name and claim to be His disciples. Do you think Jesus should be blamed for how we turned out? Of course not! Moms, please stop blaming yourself when your kids do not turn out to be perfect.

For me, motherhood is captured perfectly in a poem written by Billy Collins, who was Poet Laureate of the US (2001-2003). It is called,

The Lanyard

The other day I was ricocheting slowly off the blue walls of this room, moving as if underwater from typewriter to piano, from bookshelf to an envelope lying on the floor, when I found myself in the L section of the dictionary where my eyes fell upon the word lanyard.

No cookie nibbled by a French novelist could send one into the past more suddenly—a past where I sat at a workbench at a camp by a deep Adirondack lake learning how to braid long thin plastic strips into a lanyard, a gift for my mother.

I had never seen anyone use a lanyard or wear one, if that's what you did with them, but that did not keep me from crossing strand over strand again and again until I had made a boxy red and white lanyard for my mother.

She gave me life and milk from her breasts, and I gave her a lanyard.

She nursed me in many a sick room, lifted spoons of medicine to my lips,

laid cold face-cloths on my forehead,
and then led me out into the airy light
and taught me to walk and swim,
and I, in turn, presented her with a lanyard.

Here are thousands of meals, she said,
and here is clothing and a good education.

And here is your lanyard, I replied,^{{}{}{}}
which I made with a little help from a counselor.

Here is a breathing body and a beating heart,
strong legs, bones and teeth,^{{}{}{}}
and two clear eyes to read the world, she whispered,
and here, I said, is the lanyard I made at camp.^{{}{}{}}

And here, I wish to say to her now,^{{}{}{}}
is a smaller gift—not the worn truth
that you can never repay your mother,^{{}{}{}}
but the rueful admission
that when she took^{{}{}{}}the two-tone lanyard from my hand,^{{}{}{}}
I was as sure as a boy could be^{{}{}{}}
that this useless, worthless thing I wove^{{}{}{}}out of boredom
would be enough to make us even.

That doesn't make sense, does it? I guess that's Mother's
Logic. Happy Mother's Day. AMEN