

“That They May Be One”
John 17:20-26
Sunday, May 8, 2016
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening.

“[The story is told that], in one church, when a Bible is presented to a third-grade child, the child recites a passage of Scripture. On one occasion, everything was going well until the minister came to one little boy who couldn't remember his name, much less a Bible verse. The little boy's eyes frantically searched for his mother, who was seated very near the front. When he finally spotted her, he was greatly relieved when she whispered, ‘I am the light of the world,’ to which he immediately bellowed, ‘My mother is the light of the world.’” (Rodney Wilmoth).

“My mother is the light of the world.” -- many of us here this morning would say the same. I know I would.

My mother is the light of the world, and I miss her terribly, even though it's nearly 20 years since her death. She was too young. I keep a small picture of her on my refrigerator, held by a magnet, because that's where I remember her most. In the kitchen. Preparing food for her family, in between sitting one child or another on the counter to heal a boo-boo with a kiss and a bandaid. Or doling out hugs with soggy dish soap hands. Or sitting for a tired moment at the kitchen table, cup of coffee in hand, listening to the worries and questions of one of her 5 children. Or talking with a neighbor lady who stopped by. Or petting one of the menagerie of dogs, cats and other pets who wandered by.

My mother continues to be the light of my world, in many ways.

The notorious skeptic, Robert Ingersoll, was in his heyday, when two college students went to hear him lecture: “As they walked down the street after the lecture, one said to the other,

‘Well, I guess he knocked the props out from under Christianity, didn’t he?’ The other said, ‘No, I don’t think he did. Ingersoll did not explain my mother’s life, and until he can explain my mother’s life I will stand by my mother’s God.’” (James S. Hewett)

Those of us whose mothers raised us in the faith can relate. My mom taught me the Lord’s Prayer, and always made sure us kids went to church, even when Dad didn’t. Dad goes every Sunday now; in part, to honor her.

I. Oneness and mothers.

As we celebrate Mothers Day this morning, we acknowledge that honoring our mothers can be a complicated business. In the Unison Prayer of Invocation we said together just a bit ago, we prayed for mothers who have lost a child through death; we prayed for women, though without children of their own, who like mothers have nurtured and cared for us; and we prayed for mothers, who have been unable to be a source of strength, who have not responded to their children and have not sustained their families. We asked God to bless all these women and to strengthen them as Christian mothers, freeing their faith and love to shine forth. We asked God to strengthen us, too, as their sons and daughters, that we might always honor our mothers with a spirit of profound respect.

Acknowledging that motherhood is complicated, we confidently celebrate and honor this profound gift from God – the gift of mothers.

Today’s gospel reading is about oneness, and if we think about it, we were all one with our mothers at some point in our lives. For some, the oneness ends when they leave the womb. The sad reality is that some folks don’t have nurturing, loving, attentive mothers. We hope that, for most folks, it’s the case that they do have mothers who care for them, mothers with whom they feel a oneness.

Oneness is not the same as an absence of Self. Although babies do feel the terror of nothingness if Mommy leaves the room. A baby will wail and cry in the throes of abandonment if the baby awakes from sleep to find that Mother is not there. The excitement and joy that babies and young children have with peekaboo has to do with a brief moment of fear as Mommy “disappears,” and a quick jolt of relief as she immediately reappears.

Oneness in the mother-child relationship occurs when we experience ourselves as fully known and understood and loved and accepted by our mothers. If we have a good relationship with them. It’s a one-way relationship when we are young. Mom cares for our needs; we love her, but are, for the most, part oblivious to her needs. As adults we become aware of her needs, even care for her in her old age; as children, we feel a oneness with a mother who knows us and cares for us. This is the ideal, anyway.

Of course no mother is ideal. Some are better than others; some are worse than others. Having been on the receiving end of good mothering, I have still had to wrestle with the need to forgive my mother for some hurtful behaviors and errors of judgment on her part. As a mother myself, I have done the best I can and hope Josh & Chris will forgive me for the times when my best wasn’t good enough.

That great writer and down-to-earth Mom, Erma Bombeck, once wrote;

“For the first four or five years after I had children, I considered motherhood a temporary condition -- not a calling. It was a time of my life set aside for exhaustion and long hours. It would pass. Then one afternoon with three kids in tow, I came out of the supermarket pushing a cart (with four wheels that went in opposite directions) when my toddler son got away from me.

“Just outside the door, he ran toward a machine holding bubble gum in a glass dome. In a voice that shattered glass, he shouted, ‘Gimme! Gimme!’ I told him I would gimme him what-

for if he didn't stop shouting and get in the car. As I physically tried to pry his body from around the bubble gum machine, he pulled the entire thing over. Glass and balls of bubble gum went all over the parking lot.

“We had now attracted a crowd. Donna Reed would have brushed away his tears and granted him absolution on the spot. I wasn't Donna Reed. I told him he would never see another cartoon as long as he lived, and if he didn't control his temper he was going to be making license plates for the state. He tried to stifle his sobs as he looked around at the staring crowd. Then he did something that I was to remember the rest of my life. In his helpless quest for comfort, he turned to the only one he trusted his emotions with -- me. He threw his arms around my knees and held on for dear life. I had humiliated him, chastised him and berated him, but I was still all he had. That single incident defined my role. I was a major force in this child's life.

“Sometimes we forget how important stability is to a child. I've always told mine, ‘The easiest part of being a mother is giving birth. The hardest part is showing up for it each day.’

“This is traditionally the day when children give something back to their mothers for all the spit they produced to wash dirty faces, all the old gum their mothers held in their hands, all the noses and fannies that were wiped, and all the bloody knees that were ‘made well’ with a kiss. This is the day mothers are rewarded for washing all those sheets in the middle of the night, driving kids to school when they missed the bus and enduring all the football games in the rain.

“It is appreciation day for making them finish something, not believing them when they said, ‘I hate you,’ and for sharing their good times and their bad times. Their cards probably won't reflect it, but what they are trying to say is ‘Thank you for showing up.’” (Erma Bombeck, “Being a Mom Means You Have to Show Up,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, May 9, 1993, pp 12C).

The oneness between a mother and a child is not perfect in the sense that nothing ever goes wrong. It is perfect in the sense that the relationship is strong and sure. The relationship endures over time and hardship and misunderstandings. The relationship has its ups and downs; days when we annoy each other; days when we are angry with each other; and days when life is good and everything flows smoothly.

II. Oneness and Jesus' prayer.

John chapter 17 is about a relationship. Some call this chapter Jesus' "Lord's Prayer." It is an extended prayer of Jesus, a conversation with the Father. We might say that Jesus is one with the Father as a beloved child is one with his or her mother. One theologian explains:

"God's problem is not that God is not able to do certain things. God's problem is that God loves. Love complicates the life of God as it complicates every life." (Douglas John Hall, God & Human Suffering: An Exercise in the Theology of the Cross, Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986, 156).

Jesus calls us to be one as he and the Father are one. The purpose of such unity among Christians is "so that the world may believe" (v. 21). The opposite is implied: that if we do not have unity, the world may not believe. Our lack of oneness or unity makes it harder for the world to believe. Whereas, our example of oneness draws others to Christ. And the oneness we are to exemplify is unity in love. And that love is shown in a willingness to serve. Further, that love is shown in a willingness to die for others, if need be, as Jesus died for us.

My brother, Glenn Snapp, leads a "Nerd Church" ministry in southern Michigan. On his Facebook page he once shared a paraphrase of Oswald Chambers. The theme was disunity in the church: "It takes God a long time to get us out of the way of thinking that unless everyone sees as we do, they must be wrong ... Don't get impatient; remember how God dealt with you -- with

patience and gentleness; but never water down the truth of God. Let it have its way and never apologize for it. Jesus said, ‘Go and make DISCIPLES’, not ‘Go and make converts to your opinions.’” -- Oswald Chambers (as paraphrased by Glenn Snapp on Facebook -- status)

If our unity is in Christ and his sacrificial love for us, then we don’t worry so much about trying to force others to agree with our opinions. Centered in the truth of God, the oneness we discover is in relationship with him. And our relationships with others in the family of faith become more loving as we focus less on the need for agreement and more on the need to follow Jesus. Not to force others to follow Jesus, but to follow Jesus ourselves. To sacrificially love others as he sacrificially loved us.

One scholar puts it this way: “The church as the family of God has characteristics similar to other family units but with infinitely more possibilities for disagreement and dissension.” (John Braaten).

I’m going to say that again; I think it bears repeating: “The church as the family of God has characteristics similar to other family units but with infinitely more possibilities for disagreement and dissension.”

Put simply, we disagree a lot as the church. There is a lot of dissension. All the time... for over 2000 years. This is why, when Jesus prays for us, he focuses on issues of oneness and love. This is why he stresses the important purpose that is served by our oneness in his love. That purpose is our mission to the world. Jesus calls us to this mission – to serve others, to love others, to be examples of love “so that the world may believe” in Him as we have believed.

Closing

There's this wonderful prayer -- by an unknown author -- based on 1 Corinthians 13. It's called, "A Mother's Prayer." It's a call to the mothers among us, and to those of us who strive to follow the example of a good mother. It is a call to love:

"If I live in a house of spotless beauty with everything in its place, but have not love, I am a housekeeper -- not a homemaker. If I have time for waxing, polishing, and decorative achievements, but have not love, my children learn cleanliness -- not godliness. Love leaves the dust in search of a child's laugh. Love smiles at the tiny fingerprints on a newly cleaned window. Love wipes away the tears before it wipes up the spilled milk. Love picks up the child before it picks up the toys. Love is present through the trials. Love reprimands, reproves, and is responsive. Love crawls with the baby, walks with the toddler, runs with the child, then stands aside to let the youth walk into adulthood. Love is the key that opens salvation's message to a child's heart. Before I became a mother I took glory in my house of perfection. Now I glory in God's perfection of my child.

"As a mother, there is much I must teach my child, but the greatest of all is love."

Praise God for the love shown to us by our mothers. Praise God for the oneness we have in him through Christ Jesus. Praise God for the Holy Spirit that binds us together as a church. May we find unity in God's love, and may we show God's love to all the world, as a mother shows love for her children.

Amen.