

SERMON - God the Mother Hen

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When I was 18 years old, I had my wisdom teeth out. And thanks to anesthesia, I don't remember much at all about the experience, but I do remember coming out of the anesthesia. I remember waking up crying. I was in a recovery room with another girl – who I think was also crying. And her mother was already there – doing what parents tend to do when their kids cry – giving the reassuring touch, talking in a soothing voice – all the things. And then, all of a sudden, she just turned around and started doing the same for me – patting my arm, telling me it was going to be okay. And then, after a bit, she turned and tended to her own child again. But I've been struck by this for years – that here was this woman who didn't know me at all – at least I don't think she did. (Having taken others through the process of coming out of anesthesia, I've learned over the years that people's memories aren't so good for a bit there.) But, as best as my memory serves, I didn't know this woman who voluntarily turned to comfort a complete stranger in the recovery room. And it's a moment that has really stuck with me....so much so that when I thought about what it means to be a mother, I thought of a complete stranger offering this compassionate care to me.

...which made me curious about what people think the definition of a mother is. So I asked Google, "*What does it mean to be a mother?*" Now...I don't know how many of you know the history of Mother's Day. Until earlier this week, I was rather in the dark about it. But I learned that its origins began with a woman named Anna Jarvis. And as best I can tell, she created the day, somewhat accidentally when she held a memorial ceremony to honor her mother and all mothers in May of 1908. The service was held at Andrews Methodist Episcopal Church, and the ceremony had simply been a way of honoring the sacrifices mothers made for their children. But the day really was more of a memorial service. Her mother had passed away several years prior, and she was not a mother herself. To make matters really interesting, she ended up opposing the commercialization of the day and ultimately found herself actively campaigning against the holiday....all of which I find of interest, particularly as I feel keenly aware that Mother's Day can be a painful day for some and for all kinds of reasons. And so today, in talking about Mother's Day, my hope is to uplift the qualities of caregiving and nurturing, not merely as feminine attributes but rather as Godly ones.

Scripture tells us that we are *created in the image of God*. The question we're asking today is: *What does it mean to be created in the image of God?*

And so to get us started, we begin with our Second Scripture Lesson for today:

SECOND SCRIPTURE LESSON

Acts 9:36–42

Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. ³⁷ At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. ³⁸ Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, “Please come to us without delay.” ³⁹ So Peter got up and went with them, and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them. ⁴⁰ Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, “Tabitha, get up.” Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. ⁴¹ He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. ⁴² This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord.

So what we hear about Tabitha in this passage is that she is a vital part of her community. She’s doing good things, helping people who need help. And I’m hoping this last one isn’t a deal breaker for being a good person because, if so, I’m definitely out – but she is specifically named as one who makes clothes for people who need them. Losing Tabitha is a great loss to the community. She’s amazing...as are all of you, by the way. The community here at FPC is so vibrantly alive. I’m reminded of when Breanna was visiting from the Wisconsin Council of Churches on Palm Sunday for our Digital Equity Conversations. She had to run through quite a number of ministries before she was able to name one that wasn’t happening here. The love and care that permeates the life of this church is worth celebrating.

It's also worth naming that these are not specifically female characteristics but, in fact, Godly characteristics. Every single time we pray the *Our Father* prayer, we ask that God would “*give us our daily bread*,” that God would nourish us. And so to say more about that...because translations in the Bible can be a bit tricky...You’d think that all you have to do is read what’s there, and that it will, more or less, be pretty straightforward, but sometimes there are important nuances that we can only learn about by going deeper into the meanings of words. For example, many of us will be aware that God is called by many names – of which, one such name is *God Almighty*.

Genesis 17:1

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless.

Another way we might see that name translated is “*God of the mountain*.” And isn’t that something! Don’t powerful and strong mountains sound so manly?!

Well, it turns out that the Hebrew word there is one you may know well if you used to listen to Amy Grant. In my house, we used to have it on cassette tape, and the name is *El Shaddai*, which occurs 48 times in the Bible. Now...if you get down to the root word, *shad*, we find that the word means “breast.” This being the case, it’s believed that the ancient meaning of *El Shaddai* was very likely “*The Breasted One*.” But we don’t find those words anywhere in the English translations. Instead we hear over and over again – 48 times to be exact, “*God Almighty*,” and “*God of the Mountain*.” This leads me to wonder: *What would happen if we were to instead get to read over and over again, “God, the Breasted One?”* ...as unusual as that is for us today, it must have been quite common for them at the time, though, because Jesus references “the breasted one” as well. In Matthew 23:37, Jesus says:

Matthew 23:37

³⁷ *“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!”*

This likening of God to a Mother Bird wasn’t all that strange for them. It was even in the Psalms:

Psalms 57:1

Be merciful to me, O God; be merciful to me, for in you my soul takes refuge; in the shadow of your wings I will take refuge, until the destroying storms pass by.

When we look for the theme, we find that there’s actually quite a pervasive image offered to us of God as one who gathers people together like a Mother Hen. We’re told that God longs to do this – longs to care for – longs to protect – longs to be a safe place – longs to nurture the people. And it doesn’t stop there. When we refer to the Holy Spirit, here, too, we’re offered given feminine words to describe this embodiment of, this life force. We get the feminine Hebrew word “*Ruah*,” used 378 times as a name for the Holy Spirit, a name that refers to the “*life of*” – or “*breath of*” – God.” Also the feminine word *hokhmah* is used to describe the Holy Spirit as one who orders all things, who inspires all things, who acts as a teacher and a mediator. It’s all of these and more, including our First Scripture Lesson from today where Jesus refers to himself as *The Good Shepherd*, as one who cares for, who tends, who sacrifices, who nurtures.

And so when we come to a day like Mother’s Day, this is what we are celebrating. This is the image of God that we are noticing and appreciating. It turns out that – when we talk about God incarnate, about God made flesh – we’re talking about and leaning into what we might call embodiment. We’re leaning into the here and now of our faith.

It’s the: *Where do we see God in our ordinary lives?*

...because embodiment involves those things that connect the Kingdom of God with the here and now, not just reaching up to God, not only transcendence, but here and now. So for

example, here in church, every Sunday we light the candles. We might do this as part of our prayers. We might do so as a representation of the Divine in our midst. We might remember how the dark has never been able to overcome the light. To light a candle is to illuminate God's Presence in our midst – to remember that God is with us, and the *lighting of a candle* helps us embody that.

Another really poignant example of this embodiment would have been on Maundy Thursday where we all participated in the ritual of washing our hands – this act of symbolically being made clean. We do this *in remembrance of Jesus' washing of the disciples' feet* – this act of servanthood, of being present to the difficult that we'd like to otherwise not talk about. It's this beautiful act of care. It's that turning towards someone who's crying, as someone did for me all those years ago – even if we don't know them. It's being present to the suffering of others. It's the act of embodying the Good Samaritan. It's staying present, *even when it's messy*. And when we can be more fully present to the here and now, it allows us to embrace something called "We-Consciousness," which isn't a term we use as often. Most of the time we hear about self-consciousness – this act of being aware of ourselves. Similarly, with We-Consciousness, it's being able to know and feel, to act and relate based on connection. It's being able to tune in. It's being able to say, *"I see your tears. Are you okay? Is there anything I can do for you?"* It's what allows us to notice if the people entering the room with us are scowling or smiling. It's what helps us see nuance. If you normally show up in a suit, and one day you show up in sweatpants, I'm tuned in to that. I might actually check in. I don't have to say, *"Hey you normally dress up, and today you're not. What's up with that?"* But I can offer warmth. Say hello, ask you how you are.

We can be relational. In fact, we're created for it. As beings *made in the image of God*, we are created to see and to care about one another. We've called it "Motherly Love," and if that's a term that works for us, then great. We can uphold the image of a mother and allow it to speak to us about the call that exists on *all* of our lives to unify, to include, and to cooperate.

Today is the sort of day where we can join in with Anna Jarvis – *not to engage the commercialism of the day* – but to recognize those among us who have sacrificed for us and for those around us in so many ways. Today can be a day where we honor the ways in which our lives are amazingly interconnected and intertwined. Today can be a day where we lean into loving our neighbor as ourselves, where we honor compromise as a spiritual practice, and where we learn to embrace the ordinary – *the right here and right now moment* – as a holy-dripping-with-the-presence-of-God moment. We may often attribute these things to the Divine Feminine, but in reality, this is a way of living that we are all invited in to.

As we prepare to continue on with the rest of our service, I'll offer up one last anecdote:

There's a Native American ritual I recently learned about and experienced where, as part of beginning together, we reached down and touched the ground, thanking Mother Earth, that she would allow us to live on her belly. I had never been a part of a ritual like this one, but this

moment was another reminder of the lesson my Native American friends have taught me, inviting me – and all of us – to commit to living with the earth in a more cooperative way. This is very different from the language of my childhood which invited me to dominate over the land.

But as we celebrate mothers today, I'm drawn to consider this point. Our world is in need of people who will say yes to being caregivers and nurturers. Our world is in need of people who will choose cooperation and equanimity. We are in need of people who will hear the cries of another and soften towards them.

As the hymn we're about to sing declares: *Take my hands and let them move at the impulse of Thy love.*

In what ways can each of us respond to this call? I'll leave us with this question as we enter into a moment of silence.