
SERMON TITLE- "Mother's Day"

TEXT- 1 Thessalonians 2

PREACHED AT- Neighbourhood Church

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The Bible is full of the stories of mothers. Not a surprise, of course since everyone has a mother.

But what was is it about mothers has made our society set aside a day for them? I know that there is also a Father's Day and even a Children's Day but neither of those really carry the weight of a Mother's Day. In some ways this question is behind today's sermon.

It will not be a surprise that the version we are familiar with comes from the US but I thought that its history was interesting. It was link to the Mother's Day Proclamation by Julia Ward Howe. Written in 1870, it was a pacifist reaction to the carnage of the American Civil War and the Franco-Prussian War.

I found it interesting- here is part of it-

Mother's Day Proclamation

Arise, then, women of this day!

Arise, all women who have hearts,

Whether our baptism be of water or of tears!

Say firmly:

"We will not have great questions decided by irrelevant agencies,

Our husbands will not come to us, reeking with carnage, for caresses and applause.

Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn

All that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy and patience.

We, the women of one country, will be too tender of those of another country

To allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs."

What I found the most interesting about this "Proclamation" was how similar the voice was to that which is repeated throughout the Bible. So often the voice of the Biblical mothers is that of a lament. A cry found in Jeremiah is repeated in the story of Jesus' birth-

This is what the LORD says: "A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because her children are no more." Jeremiah 31:15

It is the story of sadness at all the needless grief that takes place in our world. No one cries more plaintively than mothers.

I think that it is because of this that Mother's Day has an immediate power within our collective spirits. We have all seen a mother grieving and many of us have also been a source of that grief.

Mother's Day, from that perspective is about the best and the worst of the world we are living in.

As we reflect on this today, I want us to bring this big and complex package into

something that we can take with us as we leave.

As I was reading through all the Biblical “mother” texts I came to a passage that spoke to me. It was in 1 Thessalonians.

As apostles of Christ we could have been a burden to you, but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us. 1 Thessalonians 2:6-8

What I like about this passage is that it takes the picture of Biblical motherhood and fills it out into a package that is part of the Kingdom understanding.

Motherhood Is Part Of The Character Of God

The Bible is written in the masculine voice. It is written in that voice because men did the writing.

But even though men did the writing the Bible is absolutely clear that God is not male in the human sense of the word and that both men and women are created in God’s image. In other words, a mother’s way of seeing the world is also part of how God sees us. The Bible repeats that theme regularly.

What does that mean?

#1. God Cares For Us With A Mother’s Love

This is a powerful repeated theme in the Bible. Possibly Paul himself was thinking about Jesus’ words when he wrote his letter.

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! Luke 13:24

What is it about that picture that is so compelling? Of course it is the love of the mother. Anyone who grew up among farm animals will have heard stories of mother hens who died, often from fire, and when they are discovered a brood of living chicks emerges. That is a picture everyone who lives in an agricultural setting knows and it is a picture that those who heard Jesus’ speak would have understood. A mother will protect her off spring with her very life.

The other side of that picture is the obliviousness of the chicks to how powerful and precious that love is. Those who have observed hens and broods of chicks will see the mother hen constantly corralling them together and often there will be a persistent chick or 2 that continually wanders away from the safety zone with the mother hen calling it back.

That is the Biblical story of God and humanity. God creates people whom He loves. The first picture of God and people is God walking through the Garden looking for Adam and Eve- just because He wants to be with them. At the same time Adam and Eve hiding from God.

The story of the Bible from then on is God calling His wandering children back to the place of safety- and more often than not they are unwilling- and yet the call goes out again and again.

If this isn’t the primary grid through which you read the Bible you won’t understand its story line. The Bible is a love story.

But that is not the end of the Biblical message. It is not just about how God loves us- it is also about how God’s people are to live- and we are to model our behavior off of God’s

character. This means-

#2. We Are To Care For Each Other With A Mother's Love

This is very clear in Paul's letter. He directly reflects God's love for people with his love for this church.

Now this isn't just a vague sentimental kind of love that people like to throw around. The Biblical love that we are to have for each other specifically follows the pattern of the love God demonstrated for people. This means- First- that the love we are to have for each other is to be sacrificial. Biblical love is not first and foremost a sensation- the way it is described in most poetry and songs. Biblical love is a costly thing than is demonstrated by the price paid for it. There is a good reason why today, brides often measure the love that their fiancées have for them by the size and price of the ring that is given them. It is very logical- surely a man who truly loves his wife will not be content with a cheap ring.

On the other hand making that the symbol of love has some very big problems. Just spending money as a symbol of love misses its most important parts- the on going sacrificial nature of love. Big rings are easy for people with lots of money and hard for those with little money. But sacrificial love is no easier or harder for a rich man and no harder or easier for a poor man.

Sacrificial love is the willingness to expend oneself for those one loves. Paul is willing to do that for the church in Thessalonica. He did not want to be a burden to them. He was willing and happy to give them whatever he was able.

And that is how we are to be towards each other.

Now that all sounds very good as long as it is mutual. When we are treating each other with respect and willing to be sacrificial this is a truly beautiful picture.

But that is not the Biblical picture. In that picture the person being loved is often unappreciative of what is being showered on them. That puts a whole different spin on the challenge to love as God loved us. We are to do so independently of how much love we get back in return. That is a serious challenge.

And this is the 2nd aspect of the Biblical mandate of this type of love- it does not assume reciprocation- in fact it assumes that in many cases it will not be reciprocated.

That really puts an extra twist on the call to sacrificial love.

Of course, the ideal of love is still of a love that is reciprocated. So how does this kind of love demonstrate itself in real life? That is where the Thessalonians letter is so informative. It shows us how a mother's love demonstrates itself.

So What Does The Practice Of This Love Look Like?

What does that mean? Paul goes through this in his letter-

You know, brothers, that our visit to you was not a failure. We had previously suffered and been insulted in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in spite of strong opposition. 1 Thessalonians 2:1-2

A. We Don't See Failures The Same Way

One of the things that characterize families is failure. It was very clear as I went over all the motherhood texts in the Bible- that while the overwhelming sense was of the glory of the mothers, there were plenty of mothers that were downright miserable.

Naturally it would be a gloomy Mother's Day sermon if that were to me my focus

today.

The reality of life, however, is that there are lots of mothers in the Bible and in the world around us that define the worst of what happens in the world.

So why bring that up? Because the Biblical story is not about some impossible ideal- the Biblical story is about how to live as Kingdom people in the real world with the real failures that are part of that world.

And today, my bottom line is- the story of Biblical motherhood is the story of the Biblical family- and that is a family full of failures.

So what make the recognition of those failures different if we understand motherhood as a characteristic of God?

It is how we then see those failures. And how is that? The failures within a family are failures that the whole family owns.

The failures of those outside the family are easy to deal with. We can point to them and see clearly what went wrong and what the solutions should be. It is so easy.

But failures within your own family are much more complex and challenging.

Seeing each other through the eyes of Motherhood, in the Biblical sense of the word means that suddenly that person who was so easy to demonize becomes your flesh and blood.

Motherhood is about being loved just because someone is your mother. That is a love we crave with every molecule in our being. I think this is why Mother's Day goes to the heart of each of us.

Now there is a side to this that we can also understand. Mothers defend their children, often when they don't deserve it. Does the Bible push us to just excuse bad behaviour as some mothers are tempted to do?

Far from it. Listen to how Paul moves to the next step-

For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. On the contrary, we speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts. You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed—God is our witness. We were not looking for praise from men, not from you or anyone else. 1 Thessalonians 2:3-6

What is very clear here is that Paul not only loves these people dearly- but he also wants the best out of them, from that place of overwhelming love. And this is what he wants from each of us within the family of God.

B. We Speak To Each Other With True Honesty

This is something that mothers often do so much better than fathers.

This may well be the most complex part of any relationship. When you love someone as a member of the family- their victories and failures grow inside of you.

Over the years we have had rental homes and I remember an incident that illustrates this well. We had water damage in a house and had to go in and make repairs. This house had a mother with 2 teenage sons. The area we were repairing is where the 2 sons lived. Not surprisingly it was a mess.

As landlords we had to fix the floor but to do so we first had to clean up the mess that the boys lived in. The mother came down and talked to us and was a little embarrassed but defended her sons. But then went up stairs and laid into them. Of course

we could hear every word of the argument.

But that is a great picture of real life.

As Kingdom people it is also a reminder for what to do and what not to do. Among each other, we are to own the best and worst of each other's behaviour.

There are times when we need to go down and clean up the messes that members of our family have made- because their messes are also our messes.

But alongside of that we are also to truly encourage each other to live as members of the Family of God.

We are not to be people who flatter each other. We are not to be people who are too proud to be associated with other members of the family to do terrible things.

We are not to be people, either, who avoid facing up to the failures of the members of our common family.

And what does Paul come back to in this terrible tension?

We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts . . . God is our witness.

This is an area where we constantly leave ourselves open to the scrutiny of God Himself. This is where God, is truly our example.

Listen to how Paul continues to speak to these people. These are the verses we started with-

As apostles of Christ we could have been a burden to you, but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us. Surely you remember, brothers, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you. 1 Thessalonians 2:6-9

That is the voice of motherhood speaking through Paul. It is a voice that each of us are to own.

There is a great deal that we could say but time prevents us. We will focus on just one more.

You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed. For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory. 1 Thessalonians 2:10-12

The reality of family is that it is messy and that there are times when the failures are spread all over the place. There are times when we do have to confront these hard realities. But Paul knows how people are moved towards good behaviour.

C. We Practice To Power Of Encouragement

We are not to be people of empty flattery that masks real problems but we must be people who have learned the awesome power of real encouragement.

We all need cheerleaders. Growing into people shaped by the character of God is a difficult and usually painful process. It doesn't take too long to become profoundly discouraged.

And what happens when we become exhausted and discouraged? We quit pushing forward.

It is no accident that the Bible is full of encouraging texts. We just need them. They don't change the mistakes that happen all around us but they keep us from just being overwhelmed by it all.

Having moved out of the phase of raising teenagers, I came to the conclusion that the best thing that I could pass on to parents in the middle of their own fire storms, was to find ways to keep them from-

1. giving up
2. doing things to make the situation worse

Neither of these required brilliant insights into theology or psychology. The first is helped by encouragement and the second is helped by people asking for advice. Usually the really disastrous things we do are fairly self-evident if we take just a couple of minutes to think about our actions.

But truly practicing the encouragement that we know we crave from our mothers, on those around us, is what Kingdom people are instructed to do.

And this brings us to our conclusion- a conclusion that caps of the Biblical picture of motherhood

But, brothers, when we were torn away from you for a short time (in person, not in thought), out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you. For we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, did, again and again—but Satan stopped us. For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and joy. 1

Thessalonians 2:18-20

Biblical love longs for togetherness even when there is separation. And Biblical love sees that ultimate togetherness in the closing off of all things that comes when the Kingdom of God is fully revealed.