

“For Mothers’ Day”
Hosea 11:1-4; Luke 15:3-10
May 12, 2019

Well, today is Mothers’ Day. Dare I utter some thoughts worthy of Uncle Scrooge - that Mothers’ Day is obviously some scheme concocted by the greeting card companies to make us shell out a few more bucks; a time of year when suddenly the price of flowers skyrockets just when flowers are most plentiful - there’s got to be some violation of the laws of supply and demand in that; and, the second Sunday in May becomes when people who have ignored family for over eleven months get to salve a guilty conscience.

Yes, I know that sounds cynical, but I must admit that when I began considering the second Sunday in May and how it might relate to scripture and to sermon, those were some of the thoughts that crowded my head.

Not content, however, with this gloomy side of the matter, I researched the historical roots of the holiday. For those of us who insist at looking at the glass half-empty rather than half-full, the origins of the holiday are also depressing, though in a different way. The whole thing started in England, when domestic and household servants were given one day off - just one, single, solitary day in the entire year - to go home. The day was called Mothering Sunday, and by tradition it fell after Christmas but before New Years. Today, it is fixed, by tradition, on December 26 (also known as St. Steven’s Day ... and if you don’t celebrate St. Steven’s yet, please see me after worship so this lack in your spiritual life can be corrected). In any case, if you were among the laboring classes, only in your dreams would you be home for Christmas, or Easter, or your birthday, or whenever.

Well, things have changed a bit, haven’t they? And I guess that’s where the greeting cards and flowers come in, so that even if you CAN’T make it home for Mothers’ Day, at least you can write home, or send a floral token of your regards, even if Hallmark or the FTD florist of your choice stands to make a few extra bucks from it.

But then again, have things really changed all that much? In our busyness, I wonder if somehow our mothers are sometimes relegated to the tail-end of our consciousness. It is almost as if some of us consign Mom to the category we hear about so often during the Academy Awards, when after thanking producers, directors, fellow actors and actresses, the winner adds, “And last, but not least, I wish to thank all those ‘little people’ without whom this would not have been possible.” Maybe that’s where at least some of us consign mother - or father, for that matter - at least some of the time.

Now as is all so often the case, God’s perspective on this issue is rather different than ours. While affirming that our spiritual family is just as central (if not even more so) as our earthly one, scripture does not hesitate to describe the bond between God and God’s people in terms similar to the bond between a mother and her child. That is the imagery that lies behind our Old Testament lesson this morning, which I now re-read in what might sound to be a somewhat clearer translation: “When Israel was a boy, I loved him. I called my son out of Egypt. But the more I called, the further Israel went from me, sacrificing to false gods, burning offerings to idols. It was I who taught Ephraim how to walk. It was I who had taken them up in my arms. But they did not know that I harnessed them in, and led them with bonds of love ... that it was I who had lifted them like a little child to my cheek, that I bent down to feed them.”

Chances are, if any of us are familiar at all with this passage, it is for the phrase we hear soon after Christmas, when Matthew quotes this prophet saying, “Out of Egypt have I called my son.” This refers, of course, to the time when Joseph and Mary and Jesus were forced to take refuge in Egypt until Herod, who was busy massacring infants boys in Bethlehem, was dead.

But the rest of the passage contains some arresting imagery, especially appropriate for this second Sunday in May, now known as Mothers’ Day. Now, keep in mind that in the time of Hosea it was the task of the father of the family to “sit in the gate,” that is, to take council in running the affairs of clan and village. It was the mother who was in

charge of the home front, and that included all the traditional aspects of homemaking: the children, meal preparation, cleaning. While this picture might strike some of us in the early 21st century as hopelessly sexist, it's only a limited picture of women in the biblical world. In fact, the duties of motherhood were seen as so central to the life of the community that women were exempted from certain religious obligations if they interfered with domestic duties. And, there's always the final chapter of the Book of Proverbs, giving a more expansive view of what women were known to be capable of. But that's another story.

Back to Hosea, who reports that God said, "It was I who taught Ephraim how to walk; it was I who had taken them in my arms. I led them with bonds of love; I lifted them up like a child to my cheek. I bent down to feed them." In other words, from the contact of a motherly kiss to the even more intimate contact of nursing a child - this is how God loves and cares for the children of Israel, for whom God would always show love despite rebelliousness and rejection by those children.

And the imagery from the New Testament is also clearer, although in a different way. In the fifteenth chapter of Luke's gospel, Jesus relates two parables portraying one truth using two different images. And in so doing Jesus does not hesitate to describe God's actions as being identical to those of a woman.

To make sure that his hearers would get the point, Jesus uses settings familiar to the people of his day: shepherds who tend their flocks, and thrifty housekeepers. Society had not changed much from the time of Hosea to the time of Christ, during which some seven centuries had passed. Men were still mostly outside the home, women were generally still indoors. Men tended the flocks, sat in the gate, discussed affairs of clan and village; women kept house. Given such cultural practices, Jesus then asks the men in his hearing - which one of them wouldn't neglect all those "masculine" concerns - flocks, the gate, town affairs, in order to retrieve something of value that had been lost? So it is with God, Jesus tells them.

And then, in the very next breath, re-presenting the same truth, Jesus aims his words at the women who have come to listen to him. From the time of Hosea to the time of Jesus, the lot of women had them still tied to home, to children, to domestic concerns. Christ asks, what one of them wouldn't neglect day-to-day concerns to turn a house upside down to regain something of value that had been misplaced? It is the same with God as it is with the mother of household: just as Christ is the good shepherd who seeks the one sheep that is lost, so is Christ the good woman who sets all other duties aside to find the one coin that is missing.

What is obviously important is not the role of the male of the species, or the position of women, at least in relating these scriptural truths. What IS important is that no matter who we are, how God made us, or what we do, God can relate to us in the way we are, in our condition, with our thoughts and concerns and loves and fears - no matter what our gender or our perceived roles in society. For we are all created in the divine image, both female and male. Let us seek to find that image within us, as we purpose to live lives that show - like God - patience, mercy, compassion, and love.

Happy Mothers' Day. Let us pray: