

4th Sunday of Easter Sermon - Sunday, May 12th, 2019

I understand the British call this Mothering Sunday. And what I love about this is how it gives us permission to honour all those who have mothered us, whether or not they were biological mothers. And it honours all of us who are not biological mothers and yet have mothered with the best of ourselves those who have come to us in need. And sometimes the ones who come are children to us. and sometimes they are peers to us. And sometimes they are elders to us. Because it doesn't matter, does it. When the mother is called out in us, we respond. To mother is to nurture, to comfort, to offer kindness and protection and to reflect the good back that we see in the one we mother.

Maybe you're one of those who has not had the best mothering from your biological mother. But maybe you have been blessed by a non-biological mother offering you that love and approval. And then we might notice or remember - all of us are offered the mothering that comes from God.

God as mother? Really? Sure, you betcha!

The mediaeval mystics often wrote of God or of Jesus as a mother to us... Which makes sense when we remember that God is neither male nor female. We do know, that right? You do know God is not male? OK, Good. of course, God is male and female and everything else too - because we are all, every single one of us, made in the image of God. Julian of Norwich explains about being mothered by God it like this:

"It is a characteristic of God to overcome evil with good.

Jesus Christ, therefore, who himself overcame evil with good, is our true Mother. We received our 'Being' from Him and this is where His Maternity starts and with it comes the gentle Protection and Guard of Love which never ceases to surround us.

Just as God is our Father, so God is also our Mother.

And He showed me this truth in all things, but especially in those sweet words when He says: "It is I".

As if to say, I am the power and the Goodness of the Father, I am the Wisdom of the Mother, I am the Light and the Grace which is blessed love, I am the Trinity, I am the Unity, I am the supreme Goodness of all kind of things, I am the One who makes you love..."

I hope you noticed that I said offered. Not given. because we are free to accept or turn away from this form of love. Turn away? Not me, you might say. Or maybe you say - absolutely - turn away! Not having anything to do with that!

Because to accept that love of the mother is to become vulnerable. it means we are willing to let someone else see us in our helplessness. Being helpless doesn't sound very inviting, does it. And yet... it can be a place of profound growth. Richard Rohr writes how

“Jesus showed up in this world as a naked, vulnerable one, a defenseless baby lying in the place where animals eat. Talk about utter relationship! Naked vulnerability means I'm going to let you influence me; I'm going to allow you to change me.” Whew!

We also know this as Good Shepherd Sunday. We have those familiar words from John that we heard this morning:

My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. John 10:27

The relationship of the shepherd to the sheep has a lot in common with the relationship of a mother to her children. And both of them can bring us to that place of decision. In or out? Yes or no? Will you choose to be in relationship with the Holy of Holies? A relationship of vulnerability. Of reciprocity. Of saying “Yes, I'm willing to be changed by you.”

Which means I'm willing to take a chance that how you change me will be ok. Will be something I can live with. Will not turn my life upside down in a way that I cannot accept.

This a place of making a choice and naming it as we say, “I'm willing to let go of my single-minded conviction that I will be competent, together, self-sufficient independent ALL ON MY OWN ... and instead I will allow myself to be defenceless in your presence. Yes, I do want to be mothered by you, God.”

Can't get much more terrifying than that! And it sure isn't easy. Frederic Buechner writes of how: “When it comes to putting broken lives back together - when it comes, in religious terms, to the saving of souls - the human best tends to be at odds with the holy best. To do for yourself the best that you have in you to do - to grit your teeth and clench your fists in order to survive the world at its harshest and worst- is, by that very act, to be unable to let something be done for you and in you that us more wonderful still. The trouble with steeling yourself against the harshness of reality is that the same steel that secures your life against being destroyed secures your life also against being opened up and transformed by the holy power that life itself comes from.”

Transformed by the holy power that life itself comes from.

Which makes me wonder... when we conceive of God as mother does it make it easier to let our hearts be vulnerable?

If we do not love, we do not live to our fullest. And yet by risking love we put our hearts in jeopardy. Every time. And here's the thing - we do it anyway.

One of my friends used to say that it was only the chemical imbalance that is triggered when we fall in love that makes it possible for us to be insane enough to risk loving someone and to allow them to love us. Because that means allowing ourselves to be really seen. Otherwise, we'd never be so crazy as to risk our hearts. Are you kidding!

And yet... And yet it seems to be through taking the big leap into love, into vulnerability, into being a child of God that we find courage and passion, clarity and inspiration to claim our path.

A child knows and trusts its mother not because of reason but because of experience. What does reason do for us with our relationship to God? Does reason ever serve us? Maybe not. Maybe we have to let go of that and be fools for God, to give over our sense of control and throw ourselves into the deep end of Foolish Love. Like Jesus seemed to do for everyone he met.

But not only are we offered Jesus as Mother and Shepherd to us. We are also called to take on those roles ourselves. Our beloved Jean Vanier who died last Sunday said that

"To become a good shepherd is to come out of the shell of selfishness in order to be attentive to those for whom we are responsible so as to reveal to them their fundamental beauty and value and help them to grow and become fully alive."

...so as to reveal to them their fundamental beauty and value...

And that is surely the good and essential work of both shepherd and mother. So, let us be both shepherd and mother in the world. And though that is such important work it can also be some of the most challenging and gruelling work we'll ever do so let us give thanks that we are so beloved of God. And let's allow ourselves to receive into the deepest parts of ourselves the nourishment and sustenance that is available at this table, from the bread and wine we are all about to receive. The bread of life. The cup of salvation. Even and maybe even especially in the presence of our enemies, let us sit down together at the table and remember how we are all beloved children of God. Every single one of us. We are every single one of us part of the flock which Jesus calls his own.

To help you remember that I'm going to play you some music. Some music to soothe and comfort. The 23rd psalm sung by Bobby McFerrin. Maybe you'll even close your eyes and imagine you are being rocked in God's lap, surrounded by love and light as you listen...