

May 13, 2018: Seventh Sunday of Easter / Ascension Sunday (Year B)
John 17:6-19: Jesus and Mothers

Our text this morning is from the Gospel of John, 17:6-19. This is part of the conclusion to a larger portion of Scripture known as the upper room discourse. It was Jesus' last conversation with his disciples as they shared a final meal together, before he was arrested, put on trial, and crucified. After he was through speaking to them, Jesus prayed. This is part of his prayer.

Read the Scripture...

This time of year is a time of transition, a time of change. These two things are literally happening, all around us. The once barren trees are now covered with leaves. Grass that lay dormant for months is now growing almost faster than a person can mow it. Flowers are in full bloom. Vegetable gardens are full of tiny plants that will soon be producing their bounty. Summer is just around the corner. The past few days it has felt like it was already here.

A lot is happening in the animal kingdom as well. Those who were born in late winter, early spring, are almost ready to go off on their own. Soon the birds will be leaving their nests, testing their wings, soaring off into parts unknown. It's a tough time to be a mother, whether you are an animal, or a human being. This time of year you are realizing that your children are either about to leave the nest, or they are one year closer to doing so. It's not easy to come to terms with that reality. It is hard to let go. It can also be a tough time to be a father, for the same reasons, but today is Mother's Day, so we are going to talk about them.

I can remember the day my parents dropped me off at Eastern Nazarene College in Quincy, MA, a solid, eight-hour drive from where I grew up. My dad said something along the lines of, "Son, you know what we expect of you." In my mind, that translated into, "You better get better grades in college than you did in high school," which would not be too difficult to do. But my mom, she didn't say anything like that. With tears in her eyes, she hugged me, and told me she loved me. That was it. That was all she needed to say. She had been thinking about this moment since the day I was born. She had spent years of her life raising me, taking care of me, teaching me things I needed to know, preparing me for life as an adult. It was now time for her to let me go.

It knew it was a tough thing for her to do. At the time I didn't have any idea exactly how tough. Now that I have children of my own I can understand a little more of what she must be going through, but will I ever fully understand? I'm not sure. Mothers have a special relationship with their children. They get a head start on bonding with them. They meet them several months before the father does, as they carry them in their wombs, as they provide nourishment to them, as they talk to them, and sing to them.

(Fathers are now encouraged to try to do some of those things, but it's just not the same. I sang to my children before they were born. I'll never forget when my son, at the age of three, said to me, "Dad, your singing hurts my ears." I wondered how long he had been wanting to communicate that to me. He has never said anything like that to his mother.)

How does a mother cope with the gradual transition their child is making from complete dependence to independence, and then ultimately, to their being on their own in the world? I don't know how every mother copes, but I know my mother prayed, a lot. I was one of those kids. And she still does. I know

the mother of my children does the same. I also know Jesus prayed for his children, or his disciples, as they were more commonly known, as they went out on their own for the very first time.

Technically it was not Jesus' disciples who were leaving him. Jesus was leaving them. As he prayed this prayer for his disciples he had his crucifixion in mind. This would be a temporary separation. They would see him again after the resurrection, but only briefly, before he ascended into heaven to return to his place at the right hand of the Father. This would also be a temporary separation, but for how long? Not even Jesus knew the answer.

I realize that Jesus was not technically their mother. He couldn't have been, for obvious reasons. But he sure was acting like their mother. I don't usually preach a Mother's Day sermon on Mother's Day. But I couldn't not do it this Sunday. Because reading through this passage Jesus reminded me so much of my own mother, and other mothers I have known.

He clearly has a sense of ownership of these disciples. They belong to them. They are his. He describes them as the ones God has given to him. He refers to them as "mine." That sounds like a mother to me.

He talks about how he acted toward them. He protected them. He guarded them. He gave them the truth of God's word. That also sounds like a mother to me.

And as I mentioned a few moments ago...he prayed for them. This was the dead giveaway, because so many of the mothers I know pray for their children, especially when they know they are going to be without them. But what did Jesus pray for them?

He prayed for many things...

He prayed for their unity, that they would all be one. All mothers hope that their children will get along with one another, especially after they are no longer with them. They want their children to love each other, to support each other, and to care for each other. This is something Jesus wanted for his children.

Jesus also prayed for their protection. Jesus knew, like all mothers, that the world could be a frightening and dangerous place. He knew there were temptations lurking around every corner. He knew there were many opportunities to make poor decisions that could potentially lead to their destruction. He knew there were bad people out there that would seek to do his children harm. He knew there were even people who wanted to kill them, just as there were people who wanted to kill him. Like any mother, he wanted them to be safe from all these things.

Surprisingly, even knowing all this, he doesn't pray for their removal from their world. This seems to go against motherly instincts. I think a lot of mothers would never let their kids leave home if they didn't have to. They would keep them locked up, safely inside, for their entire life, if they could. (This is one point where I know mothers and fathers differ. Fathers were ready for them to leave home yesterday.) Mothers would like their children to stay children forever, and never go out on their own. But not this mother. Jesus had a different perspective on his children's purpose in the world and his role as a mother.

Yes, they were given to him for a time, but ultimately they didn't belong to him, they belonged to God, just as he belonged to God. And just as he had been sent into the world by God for a very important purpose, they too had been sent into the world, also for a purpose. Jesus' purpose was to reveal the truth

about God to the world. To show the world that God was a holy God, a just God, but also a merciful God, and a loving God, and a forgiving God. The disciples' purpose was to testify to this truth, to share this truth with the world.

So in the last part of Jesus' prayer for his children, he prayed for their sanctification. Sanctification is to be set apart by God to fulfill a holy purpose. When God sets you apart he goes with you, he strengthens you, he equips you to complete the task he has given you. Jesus prays specifically that they would be sanctified in truth, a truth that would define them and be that thing that made them distinct from the world. The truth he is referring to is the truth about God that was revealed in his life and ministry. What Jesus is asking for is that the love of God would never depart from them. It was his prayer that even in his absence, they would never be alone. That is what every mother hopes for. That God's love goes with their child wherever they may go.

There is a lesson here for mothers. It's a lesson for fathers too, about who our children truly belong to. Children are a gift from God, but like all gifts from God, while they are entrusted to us, they never cease to be God's possession. When a parent makes a decision to dedicate their child, or have them baptized, they are acknowledging this truth. But we still need to be reminded.

I have an aunt and uncle that have really been an example for me in this regard. They have two children, a son and a daughter, and they have always encouraged them to pursue the life that God has for them. For their son, this has meant becoming a youth pastor, and living hundreds of miles from home. For their daughter, this has meant first joining the peace corps, then working for an international agency, which has caused her to live thousands of miles from home, in places that not the safest places to live in.

As a parent, I know this has to be hard for them. But they have given their children their blessing, and the freedom to do these things. I think most parents want to do the same for their children. I know I do, but I know I will struggle. It helps to know that God loves them far more than I ever could. And he can protect them from far more, and can bless them with a purpose and meaning in their lives that is greater than I could ever imagine for them. And it helps to know, that Jesus prays for them.

That brings us to the lesson, well really more a reminder, that is here for all of us who would identify as Jesus' disciples, which is that Jesus has this amazing motherly love for us. Maybe you are uncomfortable thinking of God that way, as a mother. The Scriptures clearly use male pronouns for God. We have God the Father, and God the Son. I'm not suggesting that we change that at all. But we should acknowledge that God is neither male nor female.

The Bible assigns many attributes to God that we would consider more feminine than masculine. God is the one who gives and sustains life, who nourishes us and shelters us, like a mother hen shelters her chicks. The Hebrew word for Spirit is feminine. The wisdom of God is described with female pronouns. In Genesis it clearly states that both men and women are made in his image. There is much more we could say.

My point is, a godly mother can tell us something about God's love for us. As hard as it may be to believe, God's love far exceeds the love our mother's have for us. Like our mothers, Jesus prays for us. Even though he has gone to heaven to sit at the right hand of his Father, he has not left us alone. He is with us. He will never leave us or forsake. He has sent the Holy Spirit to protect us, to comfort us, to guide us, and to lead us home.

It is good to celebrate our mothers on Mother's Day, but we can't celebrate a mother's love, without also celebrating God's love, because it is the source of their love.

I think I have already expressed my gratitude for my mom this morning. I wonder if anyone else would like to thank God for their mother.

I want to start things off with a tribute I received from the children of a mother who passed away not too long ago.

Our Mother is the only person who can divide her love among six children and each child still has one hundred percent of her love. "There is no death, my children. People only die when we forget them. If you can remember me, I will be with you ALWAYS." We celebrate you today mom, we love and miss you, our quiet grace Lynn Greeson.

Happy Mothers Day.

You can't imagine how much you are missed

Love,

Phyllis, Mike, Sharon, Rhonda, Jackie, Kelly

Did anyone else want to thank God for their mother?