

What a Beautiful Gift

“Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.”

– James 1:17

Have you ever tried to find a text to preach from on Mother's day? It's tough. It's really tough! It is particularly difficult considering that Lee DeLay already used most of the scriptures when she preached a few weeks ago on the “Bad Girls of the Bible.” Look in Luke, and you find this verse: “If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother . . . he cannot be my disciple.” That won't work. In the eighth chapter we read that some people came up to Jesus and said, “Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, desiring to see you.” But he said to them, “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.” That doesn't work either. In John we read about Jesus and his mother at a wedding feast in Cana. “When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, ‘They have no wine.’ And Jesus said to her, ‘O woman, what have you to do with me?’” I'd be dead if I ever tried to talk to my mother that way. In First Timothy we read about our first mother Eve. “I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet woman will be saved through bearing children, if she continues in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.” It is tough to find suitable verses for Mother's Day sermons, because in many places the Scriptures reflect common attitudes of a society in which women, even mothers, were held in low esteem, and given little credit or power. I chose a verse from James. “Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change,” because I believe that mothers are an incredibly beautiful and wonderful gift from God. They don't begin to get the respect that they deserve, and the gifts and abilities that they bring to their families and into God's world are often sorely neglected.

A few years I was trying to find an answer to the question, “Where do people find joy.” So I went out and asked a lot of people the question, “Tell me some times in your life that you experienced joy.” One of the men whom I asked responded this way, “My mother and father. That's the best thing in the world that ever happened to me were my mother and father, and my mother, in my eyes was a saint.” Five years ago, as I was preparing for a Mother's Day sermon, I thought it would help if I wrote down some memories of my own mother. This is what I jotted down. “My mother played marbles with me. My mother took me to the park. My mother went on picnics with my sister and I. My mother made me proud of her by working in the PTA. My mother always had my pants washed and ironed so that I could look nice when I went to school. When I was frustrated and panicked by my school assignments, my mother listened to my tales of woe. My mother took me to get what I needed for school, even if it was the last minute. My mother didn't let me do things that were dangerous, like own a BB gun. My mother cooked lunch for me. When I was in kindergarten, my mother let my sister and me crawl into bed with her and snuggle for those last minutes before we had to get up and go to school. My mother made a good dinner for me every night. My mother read

stories to me when I was little. My mother showed me how to put together jig-saw puzzles, and we put one together that had a picture of a sea in the background and a cottage in the foreground with a beautiful bunch of flowers and a green lawn in front and clouds in the sky, and some trees too, I think. Mother took me to LaGrange on the bus and made us run so that we would not miss the bus.” At the time I was writing that sermon, my own mother was ill with terminal cancer. As I wrote down all the wonderful care and love I received from her I put down too, the sorrow. “My mother is dying from cancer. She won't be with me much longer.”

What a source of strength and joy our mothers can be. I wish that everyone had this kind of strength from their mother in their lives. I know for some, however, that Mother's day is more difficult and less joyous. Those whose mothers were alcoholics and abused and belittled them. They don't feel they have much to celebrate. Then, too there are those who hoped and dreamed of becoming mothers, but marriage never came to them, or married, they could not have children. Single people on Mothers' Day, can find it a difficult time. A very dear friend of mine tells of her experience. She married later in life. Her friends all ended up finding boyfriends and getting married, and as they did, they never had time for her anymore. She was not invited over. Their conversations began revolving around a life she wished she could have, but didn't. I hope that today, and every day as we give thanks for mothers, we will do so in a way that affirms all mothers for all the wonder and strength and dignity that God has given to them, and the wonderful gift they are to us, and yet at the same time, be sensitive to others who single, or divorced, or childless who nevertheless bless our world with nurturing strength.

Mothers do not begin to receive the credit that they deserve. We do women a disservice when we refer to Mothers who do not earn money in the workplace as “just a housewife.” Or when we say that “they don't work.” You should try to do for one week what mothers do day after day, week after week, month after month. We make a pretty big deal in our faith about Moses. But where would Moses be without the mother who risked her life to put him in a basket and float him amidst the rushes of the Nile River, all the time keeping watchful eye over him to make sure he was adopted and cared for?

Not only do mothers get far less respect than they deserve, until recently, and even today, they are often prevented from enriching God's world with their gifts. Marj Carpenter was the Moderator of our denomination's General Assembly a few years ago. Before that she worked for the denominations news and information agency, getting out the word about the things the Presbyterian Church is doing in missions, the marvelous things, the wonderful history. In many of her addresses she has been heard to say, “I am proud to be a Presbyterian. In fact, I am sinfully proud to be Presbyterian.” I too, am proud, sinfully proud, to be a Presbyterian. We were one of the first denominations to allow women to be elected as elders, then later to recognize the gifts of women in ministry and ordain them to the ministry of word and sacrament. My own mother served as an elder and also as commissioner to General Assembly. I am glad that the gifts that women bring are finally being let loose to bring joy and perspective to society and to the church. Marcus Borg tells of his experience growing up. In his church communion was taken at a rail around the chancel area. You went up, knelt down and received communion from the hands of the priest, who also blessed you. Every face I saw, he recollected, was an elderly male, stern, strict. Marcus then told of watching his wife

officiating at communion. She was a mother. She had a beautiful, soft, nurturing face and beautiful white hair. Communion in one sense is being spiritually fed. How different to look up and receive communion in this way. In Genesis it is interesting to read that God created man in God's own image, male and female. That has always suggested to me that God, who is a Spirit, created us in an image that has both male and female strengths. We hear often about the male qualities. We don't hear very often about the loving and nurturing qualities. Mothers bring into our world a different style, a different perspective, that is sorely needed in a harsh and competitive world. What huge, momentous difference the nurturing gifts of mothers has brought into our world. I think of the difference the work of Florence Nightingale made. I think of Annie Sullivan who taught Helen Keller, blind and deaf, to read, write and speak. "The best day of my life," Helen wrote in her autobiography, "was the day that my teacher, Annie Sullivan, came to me." Praise God for mothers. Praise God for the nurturing and healing and upbuilding qualities and contributions of mothers that are making God's world more a gentler and kinder and more hopeful place.

Did you know that Anna Jarvis is the force behind the official recognition of Mother's Day in our country? She was never married, and never had any children of her own. Her mother (Anna Reeves Jarvis), born in the 1800's lived through the Civil War. She was a local teacher and church member. She worked for improved sanitary conditions in her town. When the war came along, she organized Mothers' Work Days to work for better sanitary conditions on both sides in the conflict, and after the war she worked to establish reconciliation between people who had supported the Union and those who supported the Confederacy. Anna Jarvis was so impressed with her mother that in 1905, while standing at her mother's gravesite, she swore to dedicate her life to her mother's project, and establish a Mother's Day to honor mothers, living and dead. She gave up her job to write letters and lobby people in power. She felt children often neglected to appreciate their mother enough while the mother was still alive. She hoped Mother's Day would increase respect for parents and strengthen family bonds. Anna Jarvis never intended for the day to become commercialized. The Florist Review, the publication of the flower industry, wrote, "This was a holiday that could be exploited." Anna, however, wanted to get rid of "charlatans, bandits, pirates, racketeers, kidnapers and other termites what would undermine with their greed one of the finest, noblest and truest movements and celebrations." She campaigned against a stamp that would have put Mother's day and carnations on the same stamp. The stamp was printed with the words Mother's Day, but not the white carnations.

The first suggestion that there be a Mother's day was made by Julia Howe, who suggested a Mother's Day for Peace be held on June 2. Anna Jarvis, powerfully moved by her mother's life lobbied until the dream became a reality. Today we celebrate that dream made real. As we do so, I hope that we will honor all mothers, appreciate them and work to strengthen family ties. I hope too, that we will appreciate and honor the gifts of nurture, love, kindness that we see especially, but not exclusively in mothers. I hope that we will never allow these precious gifts to be neglected or suppressed, but allow them to bring into our lives and God's world beauty, strength and hope.