

Homily – Happy Mother’s Day

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May 12, 2019 – St. Barnabas’ Episcopal Church

Today, I want to deviate from the texts that we just heard and talk about mothers.

We all have mothers. Some even have more than one mother, or we have more than one person who has played a mother-like role in our lives. Being a mother is a biological role, but it is so much more at the same time.

And some of you are mothers. My daughter, Katie will become a mother for the first time at the end of August, which means Jeff and I will be grandfather’s for the first time. Again, this is a biological event, but being a mother can be much more at the same time.

And some of you have not been mothers, at least from a biological sense, but being a mother can be much more.

And, these days we even have men who are mothers, especially when we remember that being a mother is more than giving birth to a child.

I don’t mean, in any way, to diminish the joy and the pain of being a biological mother, but as you can probably tell I am trying to be as inclusive as possible when I speak about mothers.

And, I would not be inclusive in speaking about mothers if I did not also acknowledge that some mothers are not very good mothers. Some of you have experience with a mother or a mother-like person which was not nurturing, life-giving, or positive.

I am currently about halfway through a book that my daughter recommended to me. The book is called, “Eleanor Olifant is Completely Fine,” and it is by Gail Honeyman. The book is about a peculiar woman named Eleanor that appears to have had a horrific childhood in which her

mother did some pretty awful things. There is an exchange in the book that I want to use as an example of being a bad mother.

Eleanor's mother is in prison for something that has not yet been disclosed, though we have been told that the press called Eleanor's mother the beautiful face of evil. Eleanor missed her weekly phone call with her mom, and in the next phone call between them Eleanor tells mummy about a man she has met.

"This man . . ." Mummy murmured. "This man sounds as if he has some potential, but, like most people, he'll be weak. That means that you have to be strong, Eleanor. Strength conquers weakness—that's a simple fact of life, isn't it?" "I suppose so," Eleanor said sullenly, pulling a face. Childish, but Mummy does tend to bring out the worst... "Don't you go getting sidetracked, now, Eleanor—don't go ignoring Mummy, will you? Oh, you think you're so smart now, don't you, with your job and your new friends. But you're not smart, Eleanor. You're someone who lets people down. Someone who can't be trusted. Someone who failed. Oh yes, I know exactly what you are. And I know how you'll end up. Listen, the past isn't over. The past is a living thing. Those lovely scars of yours—they're from the past, aren't they? And yet they still live on your plain little face."

Now, for some of you this type of degrading, awful dialogue has triggered painful memories of bad mothering that highlighted weaknesses and failures. Bad mothering gives faulty advice, and it pulls a person down. Cynically, we often depict these type of dialogue coming from a man or from a father, but it can come from a bad mother as well.

For many years I have struggled with Mother's Day sermons because it ignores those of you with bad experiences. This year, I wanted to take off a bit of the sugar coating and acknowledge those of you with bad experiences of mothers.

And, Jesus had a lot to say about bad experiences and the importance of letting go of them, but is not easy to let go of the grip that bad memories and experiences have on us. We often hear from Jesus that forgiveness is

the answer, but that does not make it easy, especially when the wounds are from someone who is supposed to be loving, caring, nurturing and all of those other wonderful things that we expect from mothers and mother-like people.

Now, in the stories that I have heard from some of you, you were able to let go and finally forgive by having a substitute mother or mother-like figure in your life. Once again, biology is an important part of being a mother, but sometimes we are parented or mothered by those who were not our biological mother. This can be true for those whose mothers died or left when they were young, and it is certainly true for those with adopted parents. For some there was a conscious choice in selecting a mother and for some this is a beautiful task that is still to be completed. We all need the archetypal beauty of a mother or mother-like figure in our lives.

An archetype is the original pattern or model from which all things of the same kind are copied or on which they are based; a model or first form; a prototype. In Jungian psychology an archetype is a collectively inherited unconscious idea, pattern of thought, image, etc., universally present in individual psyches.

As I have shared mothers do not all have the same characteristics, but there are certain archetypal characteristics that we have about mothers in general.

The archetypal mother radiates joy. These are people who seem to glow with an inner light. Mothers are kind, tranquil, delighted by small pleasures, and grateful for the large ones. Mothers are not perfect. They get exhausted and stressed. They make errors in judgment. But Mothers live for others, and not for themselves. They've made unshakable commitments to family, a cause, a community, or a faith. Mothers know why they were put on this earth and derive a deep satisfaction from doing what they have been called to do. Life isn't easy for these mothers. They've taken on the burdens of others. But they have a serenity about them, a settled resolve. Mothers are interested in you, make you feel cherished and known, and take delight in your good. When you meet these people,

you realize that joy is not just a feeling, it can be an outlook. There are temporary highs we all get after we win some victory, and then there is also this other kind of permanent joy that animates mothers who are not obsessed with themselves but have given themselves away.

This archetypal description of mothers sets the bar rather high, in fact it may be impossibly high. But, many of us can recognize characteristics of our own mother or a mother-like person in our lives. Upon reflection, some might recognize a few of these characteristics in yourself. In fact all of us, whether we are women or men, may recognize some of these gold-standard characteristics in our selves or in those around us.

Now, I have cheated a little bit, for this description of the archetypal mother is what I think Jesus is calling us all to live into, not just women and not just mothers. Jesus calls his sheep, he calls his follower, he leads us to this beautiful description of personhood that I have modified from David Brooks' new book "The Second Mountain." In this book Brooks describes the spiritual and life journey of moving from the self-centered life to an other-centered life. This is the same journey that we saw in Richard Rohr's book, "Falling Upward." Both of these books talk about letting go of a lesser way of being and embracing a better way of being that is consistent with the eternal life that Jesus calls us into.

Here are some further descriptors of people who have achieved the better life.

These wise people rebel against the mainstream culture. All their lives they've been taking economics classes or living in a culture that teaches that human beings pursue self-interest—money, power, fame. But suddenly they are not interested in what other people tell them to want. They want to want the things that are truly worth wanting. They elevate their desires. The world tells them to be a good consumer, but they want to be the one consumed—by a moral cause. The world tells them to want independence, but they want interdependence—to be enmeshed in a web of warm relationships. The world tells them to want individual freedom, but they want intimacy, responsibility, and commitment. The world wants

them to climb the ladder and pursue success, but they want to be a person for others. The magazines on the magazine rack want them to ask “What can I do to make myself happy?” but they glimpse something bigger than personal happiness.

Here is a story that I think is a beautiful illustration of a person who has realized the better things in life.

In their book “Practical Wisdom”, psychologist Barry Schwartz and political scientist Kenneth Sharpe tell a story about a hospital janitor named Luke. In the hospital where Luke worked, there was a young man who’d gotten into a fight and was now in a coma, and he wasn’t coming out. Every day, his father sat by his side in silent vigil, and had done so for six months. One day, Luke came in and cleaned the young man’s room. His father wasn’t there; he was out getting a smoke.

Later that day, Luke ran into the father in the hallway. The father snapped at Luke and accused him of not cleaning his son’s room. The lesser response is to see your job as cleaning rooms. “I did clean your son’s room,” you would snap back. “It was just that you were out smoking.” The better, life-giving response is to see your job as serving patients and their families. It is to meet their needs at a time of crisis. That response says, This man needs comfort. Clean the room again. And that’s what Luke did. As he told an interviewer later, “I cleaned it so that he could see me cleaning it....I can understand how he could be. It was like six months that his son was there. He’d been a little frustrated, and I cleaned it again. But I wasn’t angry with him. I guess I could understand.”

Now, Luke is not a mother, but I hope you can recognize the archetypal characteristics of a mother-like person. I hope you can see some glimpses of your loved ones. I hope you can see some of yourself in this story of Luke. None of our mothers are perfect but the ideal of a mother is worthy of all of us. Let us all live into our motherhood and Happy Mother’s Day.

And, now what I am I supposed to preach about for Father’s Day in June.

Parts of this sermons are based on or taken from David Brooks' book, "The Second Mountain."