

Sermon for Sunday, May 14, 2017

A MOTHER'S LOVE

On April 13th of this year, a C-130 Hercules aircraft dropped a bomb on the militants of ISIS in Afghanistan, the designers of which named it the Massive Ordnance Air Blast, or MOAB for short. In typical fashion, however, the rank and file of our military have another moniker for it, a nickname based on the letters of its acronym, M-O-A-B. They call it the “Mother of All Bombs.” It’s big and it’s bad, as in, if you know what’s good for you, don’t mess with Momma! In a peculiar sort of way, it’s a compliment, acknowledging the power of mothers, who brought us into this world, and who can also take us out!

But somewhere, we know, are the broken hearts of the mothers who lost sons in that attack, who despite the darkness into which their sons had descended, and the terrorism they inflicted on our world, still loved them. Proud of us, or ashamed of us, our mothers are always for us. Their love for us, well-displayed or not so well-displayed, nonetheless endures. There is a bond between mother and child that a father’s love can never match. It’s a bond, that despite whatever may happen to weaken it or degrade it, is never quite severed.

The Scriptures lead us to believe that God’s love is like that of a father’s. We pray, “Our Father, who art in heaven...” We baptize in the name of the “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” We are told by Jesus that anyone who knows him, knows the Father. But every once in a while, Scripture gives us a glimpse of the mother-like love of God. Like how God would have gathered his people under his arms as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings if only they would let him. Or take the parable of the Prodigal Sons, which is perhaps the supreme example of the love God has for us. We accept the love shown in that parable as indicative of a father’s love, but it isn’t is it? I don’t know many fathers who would welcome an errant son home with open arms and right off prepare him a feast. That’s what mother’s do! The parable of the Prodigal Sons is an example of how God, the Father, loves us also like a mother. In fact, while fatherhood may be descriptive of God’s justice, motherhood may be more descriptive of God’s enduring love.

In this morning’s text is the encouragement for us, “Like newborn infants, [to] long for the pure, spiritual milk” of the gospel. As a mother feeds her new baby milk from her own body, so God feeds us the milk of the gospel that we may “grow into salvation.” Even more than that, God feeds us with the grace, power, and body of his own son. And we long for that spiritual milk, we crave it, if we have tasted that the Lord is good. Those who have really tasted the goodness and kindness of the Lord have developed a hunger and thirst for the nourishment of the Spirit that is akin to the craving an infant has for the pure and unadulterated milk of the mother’s breast. And at that breast there is not only nourishment, but comfort and security, warmth and love, and unparalleled closeness to the heart of the Creator.

We taste that the Lord is good when we experience communion with God in the Lord’s Supper. It was the practice in many early Christian churches that immediately following the baptism of a new convert, there was a ceremony in which the convert received and drank a cup of water, a cup of milk laced with honey, and a cup of wine, one right after the other. The water symbolized baptism. The milk and honey symbolized the nourishing power of the gospel to help the infant Christian grow and mature in faith. The wine symbolized the Lord’s Supper. All three stood for the spiritual nourishment God extends to us all.

In baptism God receives us as new children in the household of faith. We receive the Father’s name. But in a special sense we also receive the Mother’s love, as God nourishes our spirits and our lives with the sweet milk of the Word, feeding us that we might grow in faith and in relationship with Jesus Christ. Interestingly, but not surprisingly, studies always show that when people are asked about who or what had the most positive influence on their religious faith, most answer, “My mother.” It is the mothers who nourish the children in faith, and who pass on from one generation to the next, the testimony of the gospel. We’ve known that for a long time.

But the main feature of motherhood, is not supplying our need for food and drink, or even our need for shelter and clothing; it’s supplying our need for love. Mother love is an undying love that will never,

never quit, and an undefeatable love that will never, never let go. Mother love is the kind of love that refuses to forsake us even when what we deserve is rejection and condemnation. Mothers spend a lifetime loving a son or daughter no matter what the conditions, no matter how bad the situation. Whether their child abandons them, fails them, or descends into the abyss of drug use or alcohol addiction, a mother loves her child in spite of the way that child hurts them, disappoints them, and rejects them. And God loves us in the same way, with the same unyielding, unending, and abiding love. God loves each of us with a mother's love for her beloved child.

“Once you were not a people but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy,” writes Peter. This word harkens back to the prophet Hosea, who married a woman named Gomer who refused to remain faithful to him, and Hosea saw in that relationship a parallel to God's relationship with Israel. Gomer bore a child, a girl, and God told Hosea to name the child “Not Pitied, for I will no longer have pity on the house of Israel, or forgive them.” After she had weaned “Not Pitied,” she bore a son, and the Lord said, “Name him ‘Not My People’ for you are not my people and I am not your God (Hosea :6-8).” God was angry and hurt by his sinful and recalcitrant children. But then there was a further word from the Lord that expressed the faithfulness of a mother's undying love. God said, “The day will come, when I will have pity on Not Pitied, and I will say to Not My People, ‘You are my people (Hosea 2:23).’” Peter testifies that that day has come, declaring “Once you were not a people but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy.” Straight out of the Prophet's book comes the proclamation of the fulfillment of God's promise, the acknowledgement of the forgiveness of God, and the awareness of the love that will not let us go no matter how much we may deserve condemnation or judgement. Despite all that we do to hurt God, disappoint God and reject God, God keeps on giving, feeding, nurturing, and loving us, always prepared to welcome us back home into the comfort and security of the fellowship of faith.

In Lauren Winner's book, Wearing God, she observes that at the very end of the story of Adam and Eve there is an unexpected and often ignored revelation. Adam and Eve, God's first offspring, have eaten the forbidden fruit, the consequences for which is expulsion from the Garden. Adam will have to battle thorns and thistles to harvest food from the fields, and Eve will have to bear children in great pain. But then, after all the curses and righteous anger of God is vented, and Adam and Eve stand on the threshold of the wilderness, we read, “And the Lord God made garments of skins for the man and for his wife, and clothed them (Gen. 3:21).” This angry and injured God, whose holy word had been disobeyed and whose justice was preserved in logical consequences, worries about the comfort and needs of his rebellious children, and he provides clothing for them. Such is the mercy and unending love of the Lord, our God.

God's love never quits. God's lover never forsakes. God's love endures even in the face of rebellion and disappointment, just like a mother's love. And ever since that fateful day in the Garden of Eden, like a mother, God has been hoping and praying that we will call home and come home one way or another. Thanks be to God for a mother's love, and a happy Mother's Day to you all.

PRAYER: Almighty and most merciful God, we are your people, born of your Spirit, nourished by your Word, and sustained by your steadfast love. Help us proclaim the good news of your redeeming love, the love that calls us out of the darkness into the marvelous light of your comforting and embracing presence. In Christ we pray. Amen.

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May 14, 2017
I Peter 2:1-10