

**PILGRIM CONGREGATIONAL UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
The Rev. John Tamilio III, Senior Minister**

**The Fifth Sunday of Easter, May 10, 2009
Sermon: “Like a Mother’s Love”
Scripture: Isaiah 66:10-13 and Psalm 22:1-11**

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When I was a kid, I played on one of the worst baseball teams in Beverly Little League history: the Reds. We were pitiful. I think we only won two of the fifteen games we played during that long, hot summer. We were horrible. Absolutely terrible. I remember one game in particular. It was against the Phillies. I never quite figured out why they named us after Major League teams. We should have been called The Washington Nationals, even though the Nationals were not in existence yet. We were just as bad. I think they named us after Major League teams as some feeble effort to make us feel good — and when your team is 2 and 13 you need all the build-up you can get.

Anyway, we were playing the Phillies and they were creaming us. It was a blood-bath. At the top of the last inning we were in the field for well over an hour. I am not exaggerating. No matter how hard we tried, we could not manage to strike, throw, or catch three players out. We looked like dunces struggling with quantum physics. We were in the field for what seemed an eternity. At one point, I literally stopped to watch the grass grow, which was a stupid mistake, because the next pitch sent a line drive straight past me. Three runs scored. It didn’t matter, though. There was no possible way that we were going to catch up in half an inning. When all was said and done the score looked more like a football game — and we lost by at least three touchdowns. Nowadays there is a mercy rule. We were in dire need of mercy that day!

There was a Little League tradition in our town: the winning team was always taken out for ice cream by their coach after the game. After the first few games of the season, I think our coach just left his wallet at home. This would be just another one of those days when he would throw our beat-up bag of equipment into the back of his old, Chevy truck and drive home — just another one of those days when about a dozen eleven year olds, wearing dirt and grass stained red uniforms and sulky faces, would slowly walk to their parents’ cars for the long, hot, thirsty drive home. We could just picture the Phillies laughing at our expense over hot-fudge sundaes and snow cones.

I slumped myself into the front seat of my mother's car, slammed the door, and looked down at my lap to wallow in our latest defeat. I didn't say a word the whole ride home — and neither did my mother. When I looked up, I noticed that my mother had not taken the usual route home. Instead, she had taken the road...to Dairy Queen! "What's this?" I asked myself. My mother pulled the car up to the red and white Mecca, turned off the ignition, looked at me in that motherly way — you know, that way that lets you know that you are loved regardless of how many fly-balls you dropped; that way that lets you know that all shall be well. She looked at me and simply said, "Well...come on!"

That was the day that I learned about grace: that divine gift of unconditional and undeserved love that we receive from God, often times through other people.

When I think back to that day, I think about that line from the Epistle of John that is second nature to most of us: "God is love." In that passage, John lays it all on the line. He breaks doctrine down to its core, its most fundamental point. He defines God. And what does he say? Some of the most memorable words in the entire Bible: "God is love." New Testament scholar Glenn Barker writes that this "Love so conceived is not to be understood as one of God's many activities but rather that 'all [God's] activity is loving activity...All that [God] does is the expression of [God's] nature...'"¹ I think that the human equivalent of this is the love that a mother has for her children — ideal, maternal love that is.

Something happens when a woman becomes a mother; something magical occurs. I saw it in my wife's eyes immediately after Sarah was born, and I saw it in her eyes again when Jay and Thomas arrived. (Lately, in dealing with Jay and Thomas, I have seen *a different look* in Susan's eyes. I know that she loves them, but I cannot quite say what that "look" is. My kids call it "The Mom Look.") I have seen that look in the eyes of several new moms I have visited in the maternity wards of hospitals on the East Coast and in the Midwest. Something happens when a woman becomes a mother. I see this look in my mother's eyes every time I see her, maybe because she does not see me all that often. It is a look of complete and unequivocal love. It is a look that says, "You are loved at the core of your being." I think that every mother here knows exactly what I am talking about. To give life to another human being is the single, greatest miracle of all. Obviously it comes with strings attached — strings that remain connected long after the umbilical cord is cut. These strings are stronger

¹ Glenn W. Barker, "1 John," from *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Frank E. Gaebelin, General Editor, vol. 12 (Grand Rapids: The Zondervan Corporation, 1981), 342.

than steel. These strings can never be severed. These strings connect hearts and spirits for a lifetime. They are bonds that cannot be described. They have to be experienced to be appreciated, and even then they cannot be fully understood.

This is the same love that God has for us. Yes, our mothers gave birth to us, but God's Holy Spirit is the ultimate power that makes life possible in the first place. It is the divine essence that emanates from God's own being and flows freely throughout all of creation. It is a fundamental part of who we are. It is as necessary for life as water and air. It is a love that also comes with strings attached — strings that are so strong that God was willing to come to us in the form of a human being to share that love with us firsthand. That human being was willing to do anything for us as well, which included the ultimate in *agape* love: self-surrender and self-sacrifice.

God's love for us is truly like a mother's love. For too long, the Christian tradition has used patriarchal language to describe God. *God is Father. God is He.* The inclusive language movement and feminist theology have offered much-needed correctives to this. But this is not just contemporary theological thought. It is not just being politically correct. Scripture itself has a wealth of maternal images for God. We encountered two of them this morning. Towards the end of Isaiah's prophecy, we read:

Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her,
all you who love her;
rejoice with her in joy,
all you who mourn over her—
that you may nurse and be satisfied
from her consoling breast;
that you may drink deeply with delight
from her glorious bosom...

As a mother comforts her child,
so I will comfort you;
you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.

This is a confusing passage. Is Jerusalem the one that will nurse those who mourn, or is Jerusalem the one to be nursed by God? Maybe it is both. Interestingly enough, one of the names for God in the Hebrew Scriptures is El Shaddai. Etymologically, this is an interesting term. *El* means God. *Shaddai* has as its root the Hebrew word *šad*, which means breast. El Shaddai, therefore, can be translated as the "God of the breast" or the "God who nurses." Is God not the one responsible for our lives? Is God not

the one who cares for us and nourished us? Of course, there are masculine images that we can (and should) associate with God: God is protector, God is our strength, God is Lord. But when we think of the images that we often associate with God, the maternal metaphors are just as prevalent: God is creator, God is the womb of life, God gathers us into God's arms and feeds us. Some of the words from today's Psalter reading conjure up the same images:

...it was you who took me from the womb;
 you kept me safe on my mother's breast.
 On you I was cast from my birth,
 and since my mother bore me you have been my God.

Many ancient faiths, legends, and myth-cycles have goddess images to complement male deities. Christianity has long ignored the fact that the words for The Holy Spirit in Hebrew and Greek are feminine and that a human female (Mary) is touted as the Mother of God. We are wise to reclaim many of the feminine images for God in order to have a fuller understanding of God's creative power and how God is at work in our lives as individuals and as a faith community. We need to resuscitate maternal images for God so that we have a richer understanding of the origins of life and, more so, so that our theology can fully proclaim that male *and female* were created in the image of God.

God's love is unconditional. It does not mean that it is something we can abuse or take for granted. It is, however, a love that we receive regardless of what we do, regardless of what we believe. In fact, no matter what we do, no matter how grievously we may sin, no matter how off the track we may stray, no matter how undeserving we may be, nothing can "separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus," as Paul told the church in Rome. This is the true meaning of grace: receiving God's favor in spite of one's shortcomings. This is the love that we celebrate today, for this same love is reflected in the love that mothers all across the world share with their children. It is an undying, self-giving, *agape* love with an intensity that cannot be measured.

Thanks be to our mothers...and thanks be to God. Amen.