

A MOTHER PRAYERS FOR HER CHILDREN

John 17:1-11

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IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Today is Mother's Day. I realize that many of us are not mothers, but this sermon is not just for mothers. It's for all who have or have had a mother. My guess is that some of us are here because of a mother. Your mother's discipline got you up on Sunday morning for Sunday school and Church when it was the last thing you wanted to do on a Spring morning. Your mother prayed for you to be good. And when you were bad she continued to pray for you to find the right way again. Hopefully all of us heard a mother tells us,

*I'll love you forever,
I'll like you for always,
As long as I'm living
my baby you'll be.*

~~Today I want to talk about a mother's prayers for her children. On the night Jesus was~~
betrayed he prayed for his disciples like a mother prays for her children. And I want us to consider something which you might find a bit radical if not initially offensive. I want us to think of Jesus as our Mother. The idea comes both from the Bible and my reading. Every morning, I get up, read the Bible, pray, and then read a chapter in a medieval Christian classic. This past year I've made an amazing reading discovery. In the Middle Ages some Christians referred to Jesus as our mother. They knew Jesus was a male. They weren't talking about gender. Rather they saw in Jesus maternal qualities that reshaped their attitudes towards masculinity and God.

For example, St. Anselm, living in the 11th century, wrote a book of prayers. In one of them, after referring to Jesus as Lord and Savior, he prays,

*And you, Jesus, are you not also a mother?
Are you not the mother who, like a hen,
Gathers her chickens under her wings?
Truly, Lord, you are a mother.*

Anselm was referring to when Jesus wept over Jerusalem and cried out, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often I have desired to take you under my wings as a mother hen gathers her chicks but you wouldn't let me."

Julian of Norwich, living in the 14th century, was another medieval Christian who found the idea of Jesus as our mother a powerful metaphor of God's love for us. In her Revelations of Divine Love she pleads with us to take refuge in Jesus "like a child upon it mother's bosom". Julian sees the agony of the crucifixion as the labor pains of a mother. We are born again through Christ's "pangs and sufferings" to heavenly bliss she says. Again she writes, "The mother can give her child her milk to suck, but our dear mother Jesus can feed us with himself, and he does so most generously and most tenderly with the holy sacrament which is the precious food of life itself."

I want to quote at greater length one remarkable passage where Julian pleads with us to trust in Jesus as our Savior. She says, "often when our wretched sin is shown to us, we're so terrified and so very ashamed that we hardly know where to put ourselves. But then our kind Mother (Jesus) does not want us to run from him, there's nothing he wants less. But he wants us to behave like a child; for when it's hurt or frightened it runs to its mother for help as fast as it can; and he wants us to do the same, like a humble child, saying, 'My kind Mother, my gracious Mother, my dearest Mother, take pity on me. I have made myself dirty and unlike you, and I neither may nor can remedy this without your special help and grace.'" Julian says this, not about the Virgin Mary, but about Jesus.

Let me remind you that Anselm and Julian were steeped in Scripture. What they wrote was grounded in the written Word of God. For example, in Isaiah (49:15) God is compared to a mother in his love for Israel. "Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you." Again in Isaiah's prophecy (66:13) we hear God say, "As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be

comforted in Jerusalem.” Anselm and Julian remind us of something that we’re in danger of forgetting, that is, when the Bible speaks of “God the Father” it doesn’t mean that God is a male. Only creatures having bodies can be either male or female. But God has no body since by nature God is Spirit. Holy Scripture reveals God as a living God beyond all sexual distinctions. Nevertheless, the Bible uses both paternal and maternal metaphors to reveal to us how God loves us.

Keep all of this in mind as we turn now to Christ’s prayer for his disciples in John 17. I want you to hear in Christ’s prayer a mother’s prayer for her children. Jesus loved and prayed for his disciples every bit as much as the godliest mother ever loved and prayed for her children. Jesus prayed for three things that Godly mothers desire for their children.

He prayed, first, that we might know God and Jesus Christ (17:3). Many of us had mothers who prayed for us to know God and Jesus Christ. There’s a great likelihood that you’re here this morning ~~because your mother prayed that you’d come to know God and Jesus Christ.~~ No prayer could possibly be more important than for us to know God in Jesus.

Jesus, prayed, secondly, that God would protect us (17:11). Many of us had a mother who prayed we’d be protected from sin and evil. That doesn’t mean we were spared disease, pain, and prodigality. But I believe God answers a mother’s prayer for her child’s protection. When we know God and trust in Jesus Christ we belong to Jesus Christ (17:6). He protects us so well that everything ends up eventually fitting God’s purpose for our salvation. Jesus, like a mother, prays for us to be protected from sin and evil and be brought at last into his eternal kingdom.

Jesus prayed, thirdly, that we would be one (17:11). He prayed that we’d stop fighting. Maybe you had a mother who prayed that you’d stop quarreling and be reconciled to your family. Some of us may still harbor grudges against family members. Think of how your mother would

feel about your squabbles, bickering, and pettiness. Jesus, like a mother, prays for us to be united. Don't let hatred, anger and vindictiveness divide you from your brother or sister in Christ.

Some of you may be saying, "It's just like a man to illustrate a *mother's prayer* by referring to a *man's prayer*. But we have stereotypes of what a real man does and prayer isn't on the list. "Prayer is woman's work." Given the power of male stereotypes, hearing a *man* pray makes a significant point. To have a woman illustrate the importance of prayer for our children might reinforce faulty stereotypes. We could say, "Ah, yes, this is the way *women* influence history — through patient prayers." But when we hear Jesus praying like a mother we're saved from the mistake of reinforcing cultural stereotypes about masculine and feminine behavior. His prayer makes it a little harder for us to ignore the radical challenge Jesus poses to male stereotypes.

Jesus still prays like a mother for her children. Prayer is one way we follow Jesus. Whenever a child is baptized the congregation promises to play the part of a parent in raising the child to know and love God through Jesus. I want you to pray for the children baptized today like a mother prays for her own child. Pray that *all* our children would come to know God and Jesus Christ. Pray they all might be protected from sin and evil and brought at last into Christ's eternal kingdom. Pray that we all might repent of our divisions and become one just as Jesus is one with God. Amen.

Loving God, you nurture and guide us like a father and mother. We pray for the families of this congregation, and for all Christian families everywhere. Give them strength to honor you in their homes, and to love and serve each other. Help all who have been baptized in your name to live in peace and unity as sisters and brothers in the household of faith, and to serve others in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.