“A MOTHER’S LOVE,” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, Michigan, May 10, 2020

Congregation, today is Mother’s Day, a poignant occasion for me. Because my mother’s gone. Long years gone, now. More than ten years gone. I feel that absence when I pass through the drugstore aisles where others are buying cards for this day. And that’s maybe a little ironic. Because none of those cards with their often sweet words would have quite suited my mother. She was made of sterner stuff. Consequently, in the days back them, I used to find a blank card, as attractive as it might be, and write the words that were more true and yet appreciative and grateful. My own experience forever reminds me that mothers come, so to speak, in all shapes and sizes. One card doesn’t always fit all. No single tribute does either. When it comes to motherhood and mothering, both toughness and tenderness have their virtues amid all the challenges of everyday life. Yes, both toughness and tenderness can be a beautiful thing.

In life I don’t think there is any relationship more basic and fundamental than between a mother and child. Our mothers not only birth us but shape us in ways that last forever. Not surprisingly, the Bible has no shortage of mother stories. In the Old Testament, for instance, the great matriarchs Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel are all celebrated. (Genesis 18:1-5; 23:1-2; 24:34-42; 25:19-26; 30:1-24) So is Naomi who began as mother-in-law but then, in the face of terrible tragedy and shared devastating loss, became a true mother to her daughter-in-law Ruth. It’s all in the Book of Ruth. (Ruth 1:1-22; 3:13-17) Meanwhile, in the New Testament we have joyous accounts of cousins Elizabeth and Mary who, pregnant at the same time, give birth to sons John and Jesus. (Luke 1:1-2:7)

The Bible’s portraits of mothers are not at all shallow or simplistic. The Old Testament matriarchs sometimes act in less than flattering ways. Sarah tells a fib to angel-strangers, denying that she laughed when they inform her husband that she is about to become pregnant in old age. (Genesis 18:12-15) Likewise, a generation later, Rebekah appears to connive with her own favorite son Jacob to secure for him his father’s personal blessing. (Genesis 27)

In the Gospels, Mary of Nazareth doesn’t do anything improper. Nevertheless, we see this mother who embraced her son so tenderly at Bethlehem exercising the maternal prerogative of scolding a twelve-year old Jesus for getting lost at Jerusalem’s Great Temple, causing both her and husband Joseph considerable anxiety and fright. (Luke 2:16-19; 2:48) Later, Mary speaks up in no uncertain terms and insists that Jesus, now an adult son, do something immediately to replenish the wine at the wedding feast at Cana. The result is the first miracle Jesus is known to have performed. (John 2:1-11) Still later, when Jesus returns to Nazareth and is speaking to a skeptical crowd in the town square,
Mary, accompanied by her other children, comes to bring home either to protect him or because she too thinks he is talking a little crazy. (Mark 3:21)

At the same time, who is there for Jesus at what first looks like a bitter end? When the rest of the world seems out to humiliate and scorn Jesus, there is his mother Mary, right at the at the foot of the cross, showing great fortitude, courage, and love. (John 19:25) She is powerless to halt the brutal crucifixion unfolding right before her eyes. But she can stand with her son, for her son, when most of his own followers have betrayed or disavowed him, then fled and gone into deep hiding. How she must have suffered at that terrible scene! However, Jesus knows she is there. (John 19:28) He is comforted by her presence. One of Jesus’ last acts from the cross is to ask one of his apostles to stand in like a son to her and, thereafter, to take care of her. (John 19:26-27) That apostle was probably John. Legend has it that John later took Mary with him away from Jerusalem to the safety of distant Ephesus where she spent her last years.

Although our Roman Catholic brethren hold Mary the mother of Jesus in especial esteem, we can remain very Protestant and respect her and honor her example of devotion and loyalty too. How important Mary was for Jesus. How important our mothers are for each and every one of us.

One of the saddest songs I have ever heard comes to us from the deep musical heritage of our African-American community. It’s the spiritual-like folk song, Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child. Surely you know it. The words are truly haunting.

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,
A long way from home,
A long way from home.

What a powerful lament! So often folks just take mothers for granted, until we can’t. Some people discover this sooner than later.

I have two lovely cousins, sister-cousins as I call them, who tragically lost their mother to cancer when they were very, very young. Although they were then raised by a loving grandmother with the considerable help and support of our entire extended family, they have over the years each felt their mother’s absence, even more so when they became mothers themselves. As grown women, they have each had their moments of mourning because they never had the opportunity to grow up with the woman who gave them birth.

Of course, there are those who experience the loss of a mother in another way because of separation, or incapacitation, or dereliction of duty and responsibility. A loss of this
kind in a child’s heart can cut, sear, or scar more deeply than even a parent’s death. Yes, I’ve known men and women throughout their whole lives who wonder why their mother was not here for them and emotionally and spiritually struggle so much more in life for the fact. All this underscores how important, how vital, how life-giving a mother’s love and presence are. What a blessing, if and when another mother steps in to try to heal the emotional breach and be the mother we need.

Fortunately, I never faced these kinds of problems. My own mother was always very present and almost fiercely loving. And she never stopped reminding me that she was my mother! My mother as mother was not without some shortcomings. Yet she imparted to me far more strengths than weaknesses and she’s looking wiser and wiser to me all the time. She was loyal, hardworking, and unselfish. And she always sought to be scrupulously fair with all of her four boys. No one taught me more about life and faith.

I still remember and cherish her Solomonic wisdom. Yes, congregation, she really did have the “wisdom of Solomon”—akin to that flash of discerning judgment displayed by David’s fabled son when called to adjudicate as Israel’s king between the disparate claims of two mothers over a single baby. (1 Kings 3:16-28) May I explain about my mother’s Solomonic wisdom?

Once when my older brother was trying to wrestle me to the ground, he protested to my mother that I was dirty fighter because in the face of his assault I would drop to the floor and, pivoting, simply fend him off with a kick of my legs and feet. My mother didn’t argue with my big brother about his claims of dirty fighting. Instead, she simply ordered him to retrieve a tape measure from the kitchen drawer. Although mystified, he did as asked—as we always did. With tape measure in hand, my mother then measured the length of my brother’s arms, followed by the length of my own legs. It turned out his lower limbs and my upper limbs measured equal, whereas my arms and my brother’s did not, which put me at a disadvantage. That’s why he kicks, she informed my older brother. My mother left it at that, case closed—and simply walked away. My older brother was stunned and impressed, even if he didn’t want to say so. Although thereafter he still tried to best me in wrestling, never again did he malign my fighting tactics. Fifty years later, I still consider that a victory for justice in its own right.

At the same time, I was not always happy with my mother’s sense of what was right. Rather vividly, I recall that time my whole family rented a house together for a week-long vacation on Higgins Lake in northern Michigan. One afternoon I went for a swim alone. Now I count myself a pretty strong swimmer. Along with my brothers I grew up on a small lake. We spent long summer hours in the water, even swimming across the lake. Moreover, as anyone who has been there knows, sandy-bottomed Higgins Lake can be pretty shallow, at least on the side where we were staying. Consequently, I was out into
the lake fifty feet and the water wasn’t even up to my waist. But suddenly there appeared my mother on the boat dock extending from the shore yelling to me—no, yelling at me. In a voice that projected and seemed to ricochet off the neighboring houses, she was ordering me to come back in, closer to shore, right now. I raised both my hands high in the air as if to say stop. I shouted back that I was fine. The water was shallow and I was quite safe. Yet my mother just wouldn’t take no for an answer. She kept shouting and shouting, “Get back in here!” It was all deeply embarrassing, compounded by the fact that I was almost a fifty-year-old man! Rather peeved and exasperated, I walked back through the water towards shore.

“Mother,” I said to her when she was close enough for me to speak without shouting, “you’re being ridiculous. The water was barely up to my thighs. I just wanted to get deep enough for some real swimming.” But she wouldn’t have any of it—wouldn’t hear any of it. “I don’t care what you say,” she bluntly told me. “You were too far out there alone!” she scolding added. “People drown in their own bathtubs, you know!” Congregation, what could I do but shake my head? “I guess she loves me,” I thought. And that’s true. Today, my mother would be reminding to wear my mask and to wash my hands. All to keep me safe. When you have a lioness for a mother, you never stop being a cub!

After my father died, I used to call my mother every night. Of course, who else in the world are you going to call at 11 o’clock at night when your work is finally done? My mother always answered the phone, glad to hear from me, even it was for a brief conversation. Today, I have no reason for regrets about missing or wasting time for conversation as mother and son. We had that time together—and I’m glad.

A good mother—a loving, loyal, dedicated mother—is the greatest blessing that any of us can know. That was true in biblical times. It’s no less true in our times. Our lives are incomparably enriched because we are blessed with a mom who does love and care about us. None of us should every take motherhood lightly or dismiss its importance for the health and well-being of our children and the health and well-being of our society as a whole.

There’s an old saying that necessity is the mother of invention. Well, this morning I simply want to finish by emphasizing that mothers are an invention of necessity. Let’s all be thankful that God invented mothers. Where would we be without them? By the cards we write to them, by the loving words that we speak to them, by the prayers we offer up to God for them, may we acknowledge our indebtedness to our mothers and deep appreciation for them. Amen.