

Mother – Our Advocate

Acts 16:9-15

Psalm 139

John 14:18-26, 19:23-27

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Festival of the Christian Home

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“If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.’ And she prevailed upon us.” Acts 16:15

“O Lord, you have searched me and known me, You know when I sit down and when I rise up; it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.” Psalm 139:1, 13, 14

“We will come to them and make our home with them. The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.” John 14:23, 26

“Woman, here is your son. Here is your mother.” John 19: 26, 27

I

Have you ever had someone stand up for you, advocate for you, bridge the gap for you? Loraine Hansberry wrote a poignant play, called [A Raisin in the Sun](#); later made into a memorable film starring Sidney Poitier has Mama doing just that. It is about a poor black family living in a cramped apartment on the south side of Chicago in the 1950’s. In the family are Mama, nearly grown daughter and aptly named Beneatha, and grown wayward chauffer son Walter. Mama has struggled to eek out a living for her children as a maid and is looking to spend a \$10,000 life insurance settlement to finally buy a house and send daughter Beneatha to medical school. But Walter has a scheme to buy a liquor store, gets taken, and loses all the money, and they are about to be evicted from their apartment.

Beneatha says of Walter, “He’s no brother of mine.” Mama asks, “What you say?” “I said that that individual in that room is no brother of mine.” Mama says, “I thought I taught you to love him.” Beneatha answers, “Love him? There is nothing left to love.” And then Mama advocates-

“There is always something left to love. And if you ain’t learned that, you ain’t learned nothing. Have you cried for that boy today? I don’t mean for yourself and for the family ‘cause we lost the money. I mean for him; what he been through and what it done to him. Child, when do you think is the time to love somebody the most; when they done good and made things easy for everybody? Well then, you ain’t through learning- because that ain’t the time at all. It’s when he’s at his lowest and can’t believe in himself ‘cause the world done whipped him so. When you starts measuring somebody, measure him right, child, measure him

right. Make sure you done taken into account what hills and valleys he come through before he got to wherever he is.”ⁱ

Today, on Mother’s Day we celebrate, give thanks for, and express love to, the one who gave us life. A day to, as Paul “Bear” Bryant, famously said for a telephone ad, “Call yo Mama,” and then spontaneously added, “I sure wish I could call mine.” A day to celebrate family. Hallmark has effectively co-opted and made sickly sweet much of the significance of Mother’s Day. And it is not exactly a day on the liturgical calendar, though we preachers know we would be stupid to ignore it, and the Presbyterian Church has wisely designated this Sunday as the Festival of the Christian Home.

Yet, who can be against it? Especially when we look back to its origins in the efforts of Ann Jarvis in 1868 to establish a Mother’s Friendship Day, whose purpose was “to reunite families that had been divided during the Civil War.” It was actually her daughter, Anna Marie Jarvis who really got the ball rolling on May 9, 1905, with the help of Philadelphia merchant and Presbyterian Sunday School teacher, John Wanamaker. And then on May 9, 1914 President Woodrow Wilson issued a proclamation declaring the first official Mother’s Day in the United States. These early efforts sought to lift up the reconciling, advocating roles of Mothers and the underlying strength of the family structure as basic to our life as a people and a nation. A structure that has been undermined in many ways of late. So who can be against anything we can do to strengthen it?

The underlying truths that Mother’s Day lifts up, point to a God who simply loves us as both a Father and a Mother. God is neither male nor female but has analogical attributes of both. In the Bible we find more emphasis on God as Father, in part due to the patriarchal nature of the biblical culture. God is strong and protective as a Father. And Jesus addressed God as Father and invited us to pray to God as “Our Father”. Yet motherly attributes of God are present throughout scripture as well. And noble Mothers play important roles in the scriptures; Eve, Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Elizabeth. God is like the Mother who nurtures and loves and supports us, the Mother who stands alongside and speaks up for and forgives us, no matter what. As Hosea says, “I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks.” And Isaiah says “As one whom his mother comforts, so will I comfort you, says the Lord.”ⁱⁱ

Even as a mother cannot deny her child, so God our advocate cannot deny, turn his back on, or betray his child. In fact our human love within the family, expressing forgiveness, acceptance and advocacy for one another, is derivative of the sort of God we’ve got. Isaiah says further “Thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine.” (Is. 43:1)

The sort of God we’ve got is a relational God. A God who though all knowing, sovereign, creator of heaven and earth, chooses not to remain in the far reaches of

heaven, but to come and make his home among us. A God who is in part of his being like a good mother.

II

We find no better example of a good mother as advocate in scripture than Mary, the mother of Jesus. She is the quintessential image of what a mother should be. And derivatively, from her we see what God is like. From the moment she is invited to receive the highest honor of bearing God's own Son and agrees saying, "Let it be to me according to your word," we find in Mary a willing vessel. Along the way she experienced a mother's pain as the child Jesus became a teenager. That time in the Jerusalem Temple at age 12 when he stayed behind quizzing the teachers of the Law after his parents had started home, it was three days before they found him. When they did, they asked him why, he replied, wisely? impishly? "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" Well no, as a matter of fact, we did not. Then that time when he was teaching and healing people and mother Mary and Jesus' brothers and sisters came and asked to see him, and he replied, "these (whom he was teaching, and not his own family,) are my true brothers and sisters." Yes, there were surely times Mary felt hurt and confused and disappointed over how Jesus responded to her. What mother hasn't?

Nevertheless she always stuck by him. When he had just started out on his public ministry he brought his newly recruited disciples to a wedding in Cana along with his mother Mary and the wine gave out. Mary confidently turned to him to do something about it. Despite his protests, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come."ⁱⁱⁱ Mary calmly turned to the servants and said to them, "You do whatever he tells you." They did and water became wine. Thus Mary prompted the first of Jesus' miraculous signs.

Of course, it would be too much to say that Mary made Jesus the Savior that he was, though she surely was the key figure in making him the man he was. She is the one constant in the Gospels throughout pregnancy, from birth to crucifixion to resurrection and beyond. Mary is there. Mary is willing to receive God's gift, and Jesus is born. Mary nurtures her child, teaches him, feeds, clothes, changes, cares for him. When he begins his ministry she is along on many occasions, and ever-present at the end, when so many others fled. She is there at the cross as life ebbs out of him, and he, hanging there, looks down at her and the beloved disciple John and in effect gives them to each other after he has gone. Saying to Mary of John, "Woman, here is your son." And to John of Mary, "Here is your mother."^{iv} Mary remains a key figure in the early church, continuing on the other side of this resurrection, the movement her son has begun. Some traditions hold that Mary accompanied John on his missionary work into Asia Minor, and lived out her final days at a house in Ephesus.

One of the most penetrating images of Jesus and Mary's relationship is captured vibrantly in stone at the Vatican by Michelangelo in his "Pieta," that touching scene of Jesus' lifeless body taken down from the cross and lying across the lap of a perpetually young and sweet Mary his mother. She had been there all along as his advocate.

III

As Jesus is speaking with his disciples in his long farewell discourse in John's Gospel, telling them that he will be departing, he promises he will not leave them as orphans. Instead he and the Father will make their home within those who love him and hold to his teaching. And to ensure his continuing presence, though he will be physically absent, he promises to send them his Holy Spirit as "the Advocate." He says, "The Advocate will teach you everything, and remind you of all I have said to you."

Through the Advocacy of God's mother-like Spirit, we are empowered to live the life Jesus came to give us. This Spirit advocates in our behalf before the Father. This Spirit advocates in our behalf before others. This Spirit causes the light bulb to come on inside us so we are able to recognize God's presence and power among us.

You may have heard the often-quoted saying of the great theologian Karl Barth, who wrote volumes of systematic theology that run for about four feet across a book shelf. Asked once what was the greatest most profound truth about God he had ever learned, he said, "Jesus loves me, this I know. For the Bible tells me so." But there is an alternate version that holds he replied, "Jesus loves me, this I know. For my Mother told me so." Probably both are correct. For the way most of us get to the truths of the Bible come to us by way of our Mothers. Fathers too, but especially our Mothers.

I think back with gratitude on my own Mother's modeling of faith for me, teaching me to pray at the bedside, presenting me together with my father with my first Bible, seeing that I got to Sunday School and Church and Choir Practice and Youth Group each week. My Mother was there constantly doing those boring repetitive things that go into the forming of young lives, hauling me all over our little town for ball games and piano practice and sleep-overs. She had this uncanny ability of serving me the green beans I despised at dinner on those nights I had events I wanted to attend like Boy Scouts or football games, and when my ride would come to pick me up, I was ordered not to get up from that table until I had cleaned my plate!

All along the way I have been blessed with a great Advocate in my mother. She always was encouraging me to stretch and spread my wings, to grow beyond our little town. She wanted me to become an international lawyer. That's what she thought I should be. That was her vision for my future. When I came round and round again and again to a sense of a call to ministry she at first said, "Wouldn't God and you be satisfied if you become an international lawyer and just teach an adult Sunday School Class?" She wanted the best for me. When clearly ministry seemed to be that best, she became my biggest supporter and most enthusiastic sermon appreciator. Do you know the sermons she gets in the mail are better by far, than the ones you hear or read!

There is one other Mother I have observed up close and personal for over 30 years, and that is my wife Gayle. She has been a fantastic mother to our three children. She has stood up for them, helped them develop their faith and character, and encouraged them to use the gifts and graces God has given each of them. When the boys were entering teenage years in Kentucky she and some other mothers banded together in what

the boys derisively named, “The mom’s brigade.” They did not like it because these moms would meet together each week to try to stay one step ahead of what these kids were plotting! And the mom’s brigade was effective.

I told you a few years ago about when son Peter was in North Carolina School of the Arts in Winston-Salem, how Gayle decided one Wednesday night after the program at church here was over to get on a Greyhound bus and ride over night and surprise him the next day at a big show he was unveiling. A few hours there with him, a meal for him, and she was on the next bus home.

Gayle did much the same thing just two weeks ago, deciding to go to San Francisco where Peter is now living and working in a Whole Foods Grocery in order to support his art habit. We had not seen Peter since last fall, as he got the Christmas shift this year. So Gayle was more than eager to take up an artist friend’s idea that a few of them make a junket out there. It was fun for the art, but it was really about surprising Peter at his grocery store at closing time on his 26th birthday. Mother’s do the darndest things.

IV

And even as our Mothers are there for us advocating, loving, standing by, encouraging, even so and more, is our God. God is like a good mother. Not only is God the King we worship, but God is the mother who gives us birth, who cannot and will not abandon us, who will make a home for us, who will dwell with us now, dry our tears and pick us up when we fall, and finally at the last provide a heavenly home for us.

Julian of Norwich was a 13th century mystic who lived in Norwich on the eastern coast of England. She early on developed extensive feminine understanding of God. She wrote,

“In our birthing our mother uses more tenderness for our protection without any comparison... Even if our earthly mother could allow her child to perish, our heavenly Mother Jesus cannot allow us that are his children to perish.”

Today we are truly a family here at South Highland, as we reflect the family God is calling us and enabling us to become, the home God is preparing for us, beginning here and now. Today in this family we are remembering three individuals in particular who are each at different points along movement through life’s journey. We are celebrating the birth of our newest child of the family, little Gabriel Joseph Caputo, born last Thursday. We are celebrating the baptism of our newest member, Isla Elizabeth Wood. And we celebrate the life and praying for our oldest member of the family, our beloved, amazingly vivacious, always alert to life in the present moment, 102 year old Martha Hagan Hood.

Each of these are part of a family called South Highland, each claimed by God’s amazing grace through our chief Advocate and Friend, our blessed Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. He has stood up for every one of us. He has been and continues to be our

advocate. He has bridged the gap for us. He has shown an irrepressible and unbreakable love for us. He has called us family; brother, sister, parent, child, and he nurtures us throughout the whole journey.

Although there comes that time when each of us must say goodbye to our earthly mother for a time, when we lose them face-to-face for a season, or when through dementia or Alzheimer's we lose them cognitively for awhile, yet through our God who does not let us go, and who does not let go the ties that bind us together, we remain confident of glad reunion. This is the God, who, as Psalm 139 comprehensively declares,

“O Lord, you have searched me and known me.
 You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
 You discern my thoughts from far away.
 Where can I go from your spirit?
 Or where can I flee from your presence?
 If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
 If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
 If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
 even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.
 For it was you who formed my inward parts;
 you knit me together in my mother's womb.
 I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
 I come to the end – I am still with you.”

As Mama says, “There is always some thing left to love. When you start measuring somebody, measure him right child, measure him right.”

Such is God our Advocate. “Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child, like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home, God is faithful still.”^v

God bless our mothers and God bless us all through God's mothering heart.
 Amen.

ⁱ Lorraine Hansberry, A Raisin In The Sun, p.124, 125.

ⁱⁱ Isaiah 66:13.

ⁱⁱⁱ John 2:4.

^{iv} John 19:26,27

^v “A Brief Statement of Faith”, PCUSA, Book of Common Worship, p. 95