

"God's Love and Our Mothers' Arms"

God's Love and Our Mother's Arms

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Mother's Day

Isaiah 49:15 — “Can a woman forget her nursing child...? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.”

There are some images in scripture that are so intimate, so embodied, that they almost catch us off guard. Today's reading from the prophet Isaiah contains one of them.

“Can a woman forget her nursing child...?”

It is not abstract. It is not philosophical.

It is visceral.

It is the image of a mother whose body itself has become a source of life, whose days and nights are shaped by the needs of another, whose love is not just emotional but physical, relentless, demanding, and tender all at once.

And then comes a surprise.

The prophet dares to say: *That*—that kind of love, physical, relentless, demanding, actual, and tender all at once—that is what God is like.

If we are paying attention, this should unsettle us a little. Because many of us were taught, explicitly or implicitly, to imagine God in more distant, more controlled, more traditionally “masculine” ways—sovereign, powerful, authoritative.

In the eighteenth century in Europe, the image of the relationship between God and creation even became mechanical, as when the English divine William Paley said that the presence of a clock—he was talking about creation—implies the existence of a clockmaker—and he meant God.

In that analogy, the relationship between clock and clockmaker isn't as much a bond as it is an impersonal contract: you make it, you wind it up, and then you step back and just let it go, to do its own complicated and, we think, predictable thing. In a mechanized

worldview, every part has its place, every piece plays its role, and every clock is supposed to keep time just like every other clock does.

But creation isn't a clock. We aren't clocks. We aren't machines and creation isn't one big impersonal machine controlled by natural laws. Creation is an expression of divine love.

In the prophet's vision, God's relationship to us is described using human and specifically maternal imagery—intimate, nurturing, body-positive, and fiercely attached.

“Can a woman forget her nursing child...? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.”

On this Mother's Day, that promise gives us a different place to begin thinking about what this holiday victim of consumption culture might mean for how we might live more faithfully, more lovingly. Not with idealized motherhood. Not with sentimental images that don't tell the whole truth. But with a theological claim:

That which we call “mothering”—at its best—is not something human beings invented. It is something that reflects the very heart of the Mother of all Mothers, for whom we use the shorthand word, God.

And that means those qualities—tenderness, attentiveness, fierce protection, the willingness to lose sleep over another's well-being—those are not owned by one gender, or one role, or one kind of family.

They are divine qualities, woven into the fabric of creation, and entrusted to all of us in different ways.

Yesterday as we were wrapping up work day, I mentioned to someone that I was preaching this morning on Mother's Day, and the response came: Boy, that's fraught.

And so Mother's Day has become in some circles. But it need not be so, if we will linger for just a second over the honesty of this text.

It says: “*Even these may forget...*”

That line matters.

Because it tells one of the truths that we often avoid on Mother's Day: not all experiences of motherhood or mothering are nurturing or safe. Not every mother or

mother figure has been able to love in life-giving ways. Some relationships with mothers are complicated, strained, or marked by absence or harm.

Scripture does not deny that reality. It names it.

Scripture says that even this most powerful of human bonds can falter.

I know that from my own experience of living with both a mother and a father who were addicted to alcohol. And I know that some of you have lived that same experience in your own way. And if it wasn't addiction it may have been abuse. And if it wasn't abuse it may have been abandonment.

But for whatever reason, life didn't live up to the label.

And precisely there—right at the edge of that truth—God speaks:

“Yet I will not forget you.”

In other words, God's love is not just a projection of our best human experiences. It is more reliable than even our most enshrined relationships.

And that is good news—especially for those of us who come to this day carrying grief, or distance, or unanswered longing.

When I marry young people—as I will be doing in a few days for a family in one of my previous congregations—I remind them in our very first session of pre-marital counseling that although it possible for people to dissolve the bonds of marriage if that seems the best undesirable option, parenting, however, changes everything. You can never become unparented. I've heard it many times and have heard some of you say it here: Once a parent, always a parent. Without doing a single conscious thing, a newborn baby does what no one except the Holy Spirit can do: she changes the very identity of her parents. Before she was born, they were people; with her birth, they became parents, and that fundamental shift in self-awareness is irrevocable.

Many years ago, a friend and I were talking about her husband and their daughter, and she said something I've never forgotten and never will. She said, “As much as I don't like to, I can imagine my life without Bill. I cannot imagine my life without Rachel.”

I wonder how widespread that sentiment is among mothers. I wonder how widespread it is among fathers.

I have heard it said about politics, about business, about churches, about education, about communities, neighborhoods, and even families: it's all about relationships. And that's what the image in our text plays on: the relationship beneath and within that first relationship that we all experience when we enter this world, our mothers' arms.

The nursing mother. The one who feeds, who holds, who watches, who responds, who rearranges her life around the flourishing of another.

That is what God's love is like. A prophet hears a divine word telling him to reach for the image of the strongest bond between humans—a mother's love for her child—and to reassure the frightened and lonely among us that God's bond is even stronger.

As every mother knows, that bond is not a simple thing. It is a psychological, emotional, physical, and spiritual cable woven of many strands, each strand a gift reflecting the giver of the mother, the child, and the bond.

So what are those gifts?

One is **attentiveness**.

A nursing mother cannot afford to be entirely distracted. She learns the cues, the cries, the rhythms. She pays attention not in a generalized way, but in a deeply particular way. She learns to distinguish her baby's voice from all others and she learns the different kinds of cries from that single child.

And that is how God knows us—not as a category, not as an abstraction, but intimately as individuals, uniquely created, uniquely respected, uniquely vulnerable.

And that is also how we are called to know one another.

In a world that reduces people to labels—political, cultural, even theological—this kind of attentiveness is countercultural. It says: I will not assume I already know your story because I know your label. I will stay present to who you actually are.

Another strand in the cable of divinely-given mother-love is **fierce, embodied love**.

The image here is not gentle in a fragile sense. It is strong. It is persistent. It shows up again and again, even when it is inconvenient, even when it costs something. It is demanding of both mother and child.

Many in this congregation have seen that kind of love in action—for example and especially in the lives of LGBTQIA+ people and their families.

You have seen parents who had to grow, to stretch, to re-learn what love looks like as their children came into their own truth that differed significantly from the truths that their parents inhabited.

You have seen couples who have built families not because society handed them a blueprint, but because love demanded it, and love gave them both the creativity and the determination to do it and to do it openly and love demanded that their family be respected for the self-sacrificial love that it embodies and the contribution to the world that their family makes.

You have seen chosen families—friends, mentors, communities—who have stepped in to nurture, protect, and sustain when biological systems fell short. And I am a living example of that stepping-up and stepping-in.

That, too, is mothering.

Not because it fits a traditional mold, but because it reflects the very heart of God.

My grandmother, who was related to me by neither blood nor law, was my first and most important theological teacher. She embodied the kind of love for a motherless child that responds without hesitation, that gives without counting the cost, and that seeks nothing in return except knowing that she did what needed to be done for the sake of one who could not do for himself.

And more than that—much more than that—she embodied God’s love by providing a place at her table for anyone who might show up at her door. She provided real, tangible hospitality from physical resources that were modest and spiritual resources that were vast. She didn’t need a lot of money or sophistication to set another place at the table; she simply relied on her open heart and her attentive mind to provide a nourishing welcome to a steady stream of lives. She died when I was seventeen, the church was packed for her funeral, and some of the light went out of my young life.

And then there is the gift of **tenacity**.

“Even these may forget... yet I will not forget you.”

God’s love does not give up.

It does not withdraw when we are difficult, or uncertain, or still becoming.

It stays.

And that kind of staying—quiet, steady, enduring—is one of the most powerful forces in the world.

In one of my previous congregations, a mother sat in the second pew on the right Sunday after Sunday, leading that congregation, nurturing that congregation, and supporting that congregation even though she carried an enormous grief to church with her every Sunday. Just a couple of years before I arrived at that church, her twenty-seven-year-old son, her only son, had been killed when his motorcycle was struck head-on by a driver who was suffering a heart attack. And whenever we sang the hymn “I Was There to Hear Your Borne Cry,” she and I would weep through the entire hymn.

As the Song of Solomon says, “Love is as strong as death.”

It is what allows people to grow into themselves.

It is what creates safety where there once was fear.

It is what makes transformation possible.

So perhaps the invitation of this day is not simply to celebrate mothers—though we may do that with gratitude and care.

Perhaps the deeper invitation is to recognize and cultivate *the mother-heart of God* wherever it appears.

In those who nurture life.

In those who make room for others to become.

In those who love with courage when it would be easier to withdraw.

This past Friday evening, about sixty of us were privileged to hear an extraordinarily gifted ensemble of musicians perform “Lullabies and Laments” here in this space as the Resonance Project’s final concert of this season. Lullabies and Laments was mainly a collection of pieces by seventeenth-century women composers, one of whom, Isabella Leonarda, was the Mother Superior of her Ursuline convent in Novara, Italy. During a composing career spanning sixty years, she wrote twenty books of music, including motets, sacred concertos, litanies, masses, and musical settings in Latin and Italian for the evening service of Vespers. There is little doubt that the church provided the main avenue for this talented mother of nuns to share her gifts with the world and enlarge the

creative space for other women composers. Lullabies and Laments was an entirely fitting introduction, therefore, for Mother's Day weekend.

The inspiration of those who make room for others to become their God-given selves provides us the chance to ask ourselves:

Where am I being called to embody that kind of love?

Where am I being invited to be more attentive?

More spacious?

More steadfast?

Because if our text from Isaiah is true—and I believe it is—then those strands that make up the cable of a mother's love are not limited to a few.

Those strands are expressions of divine love, and they are entrusted to the whole community.

On this Mother's Day, we honor all who have lived that love into being—biological mothers, adoptive parents, step-parents, same-sex parents, grandparents, mentors, friends, and chosen family of every kind. And in the case of my grandmother-who-wasn't-my-grandmother, those fictive kin who enlarge their circle of care and open their hearts and arms and treat us like their own.

We honor those who have done it well.

We honor those who are still learning.

We honor those who carry both joy and sorrow in the same heart.

And we remember this:

Before any of us ever learned how to love, we were first held in a love that will not forget us.

A love as close as breath.

As fierce as a mother's embrace.

As enduring as God's own heart.

May we trust that love.

May we enflesh that love.

And may we share that love.

Now and always.

Amen.