

Mindful Mother's Day

A sermon by Seanan Holland, UUCR Ministerial Intern

God have mercy.

It's mother's day and the preacher isn't even a parent, much less a mother.

Lord have mercy.

What if, by way of some technicality, what if god and/or the lord weren't actually able to have mercy.

These phrases are handed down through the centuries in the Judeo-Christian tradition. They have at times been burdened with patriarchal meaning. So it's interesting to note, that in the Syriac family of languages – the original languages of the Judeo-Christian tradition, the root word of “mercy” is “womb.” The question of translation has some interesting implications. There is a feminine quality hiding in the meaning of these phrases. How would one make a verb out of the word womb, which in the Aramaic is likely how it would have appeared? Would we say, “God womb me,” or “God care for me as only one with a womb could care for me.”

In our language, and perhaps in other parts of our culture, the depths of meaning about motherhood are sometimes obscured. But as sure as we are all here, so is the art of motherhood. We might have to look past some of the traditioned or even patriarchal aspects of the language. And in our culture, we might have to look past the commercialism and beyond the hallmark claims to discover the depths of what motherhood is. But this essential and life-giving institution of humanity, however imperfect it is, deserves our highest regard. Our degree of mindfulness of motherhood will be reflected everywhere in society.

At some point in my life, probably around the time I started making my own lunch for school, I began to realize that there was a great deal of effort in being a mom. Getting us all school clothes each year, looking for lost library books, packing lunches, and yes, even occasionally answering a phone call from school when I was in fourth grade... “Mrs. Holland, will you please come get your son.” Are these the things that Mother's Day means to recognize and honor. Aside from disruptive eight-year olds, I think we would have to answer, “yes” – but our answer wouldn't yet be complete.

I've talked with some of you about what it means to be a mother, and you have graciously shared your stories. The balancing act of trying to set good boundaries and raise responsible children – and at the same time wanting to fulfill their wants and needs. Trying to get children to eat healthily – even when the culture around them suggests that sugar and salt laden carbohydrates are

an adequate diet. And as you've shared, I've heard stories that take me to specific places in my own childhood. Trips to the beach with Mom. Re-reading worn out books before bed.

All of these things are easy to see and recall, and easy to be thankful for, because we really do appreciate them – especially since we may have to do them for ourselves now. And eventually we, who are not parents, realize that there really is a lot of effort that goes into it. A lot of self-sacrifice. Children don't always understand this idea of "me-time" that can be so important to adults – and to a mother's ability, day after day, to keep offering care. Where is the time for a mother to rejuvenate herself? So, when a kinder-gardner says, "Mom, I don't want to ride the bus. I want you to take me." I imagine this re-arranging of schedules and plans can be a challenging moment. But Mom goes through all of the steps to get her child out of the house and safely buckled into the car seat, and out into the traffic toward school. And then, in the building wave of rush-hour, the four-year-old asks a question like, "Mom, what's more important? God or the sun?"

These are the special moments that mother's know about, that they remember over the years and can easily recall over a cup of coffee. It's in that special relationship that a mother has with a child, that she can peer through the busy-ness of daily life and see the depth of meaning in her role as a mother, and the trusted place she has in her child's life.

But what about the rest of us who don't always get the opportunity to witness those special moments? How shall we come to understand the depth of what motherhood means. I think I was around 18 when I finally had a realization that sunk in deep enough to be a permanent memory, and one that reached beyond the logistical aspects of motherhood.

My parents separated when I was about 16. My mother was offered a job reassignment that was in Texas – over a thousand miles away. Although we talked on the phone almost every week, I only saw her once in almost two years. When I finally saw her again, I had my driver's license and she had moved back to Michigan. I drove by myself across the state, along the same roads that we had driven on family vacations – only now I was in the front seat by myself, rather than the back seat with my brother and sister. My mother was living in my grandma's old farmhouse – the same house she grew up in. I went slowly up the long gravel driveway and heard the familiar crunch of stones under the tires. And as I stopped the car, I turned to look toward the back door of the house – my mother was standing there, exactly where my grandmother had stood so many times,, to see the family arrive. It was in that moment of reunion that I thought, that person is my mother, that person gave birth to me, and took care of all my injuries,, and remembers all the funny things I said. It was a memory not of so many words but of a deep realization of my own contingency and fragility in this world. A dawning that someone had unconditional love for me even across the miles of separation. She had missed many of my teenage years and I was then finding my own way into adulthood, so it was a strange feeling to make friends with her again. But that is essentially what we did.

I think you have the idea by now that my family is a band of travelers and we aren't always going in the same direction. So we have become good letter-writers. It was in this new friendship I had found with my mother that I wrote to her and asked her if she would write down the things she

remembered about growing up on the farm. I still have this binder of letters, and although we don't refer to it often, it something that we both know is there and that is a good part of our relationship.

We are right to look for the meaning of motherhood in its daily tasks – in lunches packed, and stories read and all the goings to-and-from that motherhood entails. And we would discover even more about the meaning of motherhood in looking deeper into the relationships that we have with mothers and as mothers. We might even discover depths of meaning in relationships with mothers and nurturers who were not our own mothers – but who cared for us nonetheless.

As we try to be mindful of all of the things this day means, let us also be aware, and perhaps even critical about the meanings of motherhood that our society may emphasize. To regard motherhood as sacred is not the same as putting it on a pedestal.

But there is a cultural icon of motherhood that sits on a pedestal – one that has at times been laden with exhausting expectations of perfection, with assumptions from a culture that no longer is, and that would rather make a profit in the name of motherhood than have us become a society of nurturers. I'll say a few words about each of these in turn.

Having a certain biology does not oblige one to be a mother. Historically such an assumption has led too easily to the expectation that nurturing falls on mothers alone; and then from there,, that imperfections in the art of nurturing were somehow not also the responsibility of fathers and of men. The possibility that having a certain biology might render some as more natural primary care-givers does not excuse the rest of us from being part of a culture of care. For all our progress, society is still trying to shake off this and similar assumptions.

The United States in particular is a culture of cultures, a society of diversity. And within that blessing of diversity,, within the desire toward, and within the challenges of motherhood, we understand that families come in all shapes and sizes. Some families are adoptive, some have one mom or dad, and some have two moms or two dads. In exasperation over the opposition to marriage rights, I heard my mother say, “There are worse things in this world than having two parents who love you.” Let it be the quality of nurture that we value rather than some arbitrary pattern of family.

And finally we come to the tension between valuing market work and valuing care work. In our commercialized society, we are bombarded with messages that promote business success over relationship success. It is not hard to imagine a society, that in deeds if not in beliefs, holds the economy as sacred and relationships as a matter of choice. All we have to do is turn on the news. But there is hope in some mindful imagination of alternatives – of what it might look like to live in a culture characterized by care.

When I think about some of these cultural challenges to motherhood, metaphorically, what comes to mind is an image of a group of mothers, perhaps Unitarian Universalist mothers, approaching the cultural icon of motherhood and removing or adjusting some of the symbols and assumptions – of updating the messages that too narrowly define motherhood. We recognize that there are some

truths, some experiences that can be added to this image, or icon, only by women, by those who are or who desire to be mothers. But the art of nurturing that might be contained in such an image is something that we can all learn from, not just mothers.

So when we look for the meaning of Mothers' Day, let us be mindful of all these things: of the basic logistical effort required, of the depth of relationships we have with and as mothers, and also of the cultural messages that nurturing sometimes has to compete with.

As I close, I'd like to suggest again the possibility of writing letters as a part of celebrating Mothers' Day,, as way of collecting and sharing the wisdom and meaning of what it means to be a mother,, and even as a way of expanding or healing our relationships with mothers.

I'm guessing that maybe some of the conventions of adolescence that I remember are still in place: selective hearing, rapidly changing interests, a preference for entertainment...

If these things are still the case, it's possible that a letter to Mom might not involve a lot of words, and a letter from Mom might sit in a drawer for long time. I have a book from my mom that sat unopened in a drawer for ten years, but I found it when I needed to find it.

Let us take this day to be mindful of all the different things that it means to be a mother. And perhaps a way that we might do that is by writing a letter to our mothers, or asking them to write to us. If we have older children, we might write to them about whom they were when they were growing up, or about who you were when you were growing up.

On this Day I wish you all, especially the mothers, a happy, bonding, and relaxing Mothers' Day.

Blessed be the mothers in our lives...

Benediction

Let us go from this sanctuary with a spirit of care

That we might uplift those around us,

And may we find ways to appreciate the care and uplift we have received.

Blessed be.

In celebrating Mothers Day we come to a task as large as all of humanity and as particular as one unique human life. Each of us has come into this sanctuary with her own stories about, and with his own relationship with that particular person in our lives that we call “Mother.” Some of our stories are of joy and nurture. Some of our stories are of struggle and acceptance. Some of us hold dear a biological mother, and some of us hold dear an adopted child. As we honor Mother’s Day, we reach out with imperfection and with love to hold all of these stories in our mutual and caring regard. Somewhere in the nurturing that we have received, we find the sacredness of motherhood.

In this ceremony we will light three candles – each for an aspect of motherhood – and a fourth that strives to honor all that motherhood is.

We recognize the essential role of mothers in sustaining life – in this candle we hold gratitude for nurturing received.

We recognize the grief of mothers lost – in this candle we hold the memories of those who bore and nurtured us.

We recognize the unique depth in the bonds and meaning of motherhood – in this candle we hold dreams and hopes along with disappointments and sorrows.

And with this candle, we draw a wide circle around all that motherhood is – we recognize our aspirations to be a community of nurture, and to live within a society of nurture.