

May 14, 2017 • Mother's Day • Children's Church



“God's Steadfast Love”

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris

John 14:1-7

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.

And you know the way to the place where I am going.” Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

In the words of the Catholic spiritual writer Thérèse of Lisieux: “the loveliest masterpiece of the heart of God is the heart of a mother”—and as we well know, that could be a birth mother, an adoptive mother, a stepmother, a special aunt, a grandmother, a teacher, a mentor, or in some cases, a really great dad. And to many kids, God has given a loving, mothering congregation, as is this one, for so many children and youth.

The point is, we learn God's amazing love for us through those adults who live it and make it real in our lives. On Mother's Day we lift up mothers of all kinds, all you who live out God's love and do God's work in bearing and nurturing and raising up each new generation of God's people on this earth. Today we honor you and show our love for you and take time to simply pause and reflect and say “thank you.”

This morning, we give thanks, especially, for the mothers of all the babies born into our church family since last Mother's Day—William Scott, Tommy Theile, Ruby Rasmussen, Colby Mae Williams, Beatrix Milligan, Jane Henricks, Amelia English, Luke Sarley, Loren Garner, and Mia Eskridge!—each a window into God's great love for us, God's gift to us, as is a mother's gift of love to her child.

The love as of the Father for the Son. The love of brothers and sisters in the household of faith. The love that casts out fear and sets us free to love one another. It is this love that makes all the difference in the world.

God's love for us is so great and all-encompassing, we need the whole season of Eastertide to take it in. Each Sunday in this joyful season, the Scriptures seem to be almost repeating themselves as they tell us over and over again about God's love as revealed to us in our Risen Lord, as if hearing it just once couldn't possibly be enough to take it in.

What a word to hear again now, on this Mother's Day. The parallels between God's love and a mother's love are plain to see. As we sang in our opening hymn: “Now thank we all our God, with heart and hands and voices, who wondrous things has done, in whom this world rejoices; who from our mothers' arms has blessed us on our way with countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.”

Countless gifts of love. This is love that lays down its life for others, which is, of course, what mothers do, in ways big and small. It is the love that abides in us, as does a mother's love, no matter what. And this love, you see, raises us up and makes us bold, just like a mother's love, because it makes us strong and it gives us courage, just like a mother's love.

We get some great material on this subject from today's Gospel. It's from a long speech of Jesus in John's Gospel, a talk he gave to his closest disciples on the night before he was arrested and taken away from them to be crucified. He's talking to the disciples about how he will be leaving them and understandably, they are very afraid. What does Jesus do? He stays present with them. And he gives them a gift and he makes them a promise.

First, the gift. It is the gift of assurance. It is the gift of knowing what Paul Tillich called “the ground of faith.” “Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.” These are words we read at funerals and memorial services to comfort us when we are grieving over the death of a loved one. Countless millions have been comforted and buoyed by these words. But when Jesus first said this to them, he was not only speaking to our experience of death, but to those disciples' experience of life. How were they going to live after he'd gone? How were they going to live without him? How were they to follow a Savior they could no longer see? How would they keep the faith when life became threatening and scary? We can sense their confusion, their anxiety, their fear that night.

He said to them—so simply and so profoundly—let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. Do not worry. Jesus is all about love. On that night before he said these words he had first washed their feet. He had been at table with them. He had given them the new commandment to love one another as he has loved them. And he reminded them: there's no reason, in heaven or on earth, to worry or to be afraid.

First the gift—the gift of abiding love—then the promise: “In God’s house are many dwelling places. I’m going to prepare a place for you. And I’ll come and take you to myself, so that where I am, you may be also.” He will be with us at the end of time when he will come again and he will be with us now, in every moment of our living.

How does a Christian come to have a faith so deep as to be able, in the face of all adversity, to have a heart that is not troubled? How can we sing, in the words of the beautiful old hymn, “it is well with my soul”? In Jesus’ words, we get there by practicing trust, by gradually learning to receive his gift and to believe his promise.

These Greek verses have been translated and interpreted in so many ways. In God’s house are many mansions. In God’s house are many rooms. There’s plenty of room in the house of God. And there’s another translation of this verse that is wonderful. In God’s house are many resting places, many rest stops.

Many rest stops. A place to be refreshed, to get a glass of water, to take a deep breath. In God’s house are many rest stops. A place to take a quick nap, to compose yourself, to clear your brain. A place to center in. So that in the midst of everything that’s surely going to keep coming your way, when things conspire to wear you out or mess you up or rattle your cage or make you afraid, you can go to one of God’s rest stops and in silence or in worship or in prayer you can close your eyes and hear him saying again to you: I am with you. Let not your heart be troubled.

It’s so hard for us in the midst of busy lives to find a moment of peace and quiet. We Christians have a treasure trove of spiritual practices that take us to one of God’s rest stops. Prayer, worship... for many it’s walking the labyrinth, a time to slow down our bodies and focus our attention so that our soul can open to the healing presence of the living God.

Another is called the Breath Prayer. It’s a very ancient Christian practice and a very do-able one that doesn’t require us to go off to a monastery for a year. In a nutshell, here’s how you do it: get quiet. Pay attention to how you’re feeling and to what your life most needs at the moment. And then create a very short one-line prayer that expresses your need...”O God, teach me to pray.” “O God, give me strength.” “Jesus, let me feel your love.” Or maybe it’s just one word, like ‘Peace’”. And then, whatever your breath prayer is, let it become a regular part of all you do—when you’re in your car, or waiting in line, when you go out the front door in the morning. Pray it as you begin to prepare a meal or put the kids to bed at night. Pray it when your heart becomes troubled and you need to return to the harbor of God’s love. Pray it in the night when you can’t sleep or the first thing in the morning.

One such breath prayer comes from the Book of Proverbs: “when you lie down, you will not be afraid. You will lie down and your sleep will be sweet.” It sounds like a lullaby a mother might sing to her little one. A breath prayer, to help us go to one of God’s many rest stops and live into the words of Jesus’ gift of peace and his promise to be with us always.

The gift and promise of Jesus that we hear today is the gift and promise of God’s love poured into our lives, both now and forever. The great spiritual writer Johann Christoph Arnold put it this way: “Eternity is a new life, free of death’s destructive powers, a fullness of life where love reigns supreme. The promise of everlasting life has less to do with duration of time and more to do with a certain kind of life—one of peace, fellowship, and abundance—and such a life can begin now. Such [a]...way of life could be called ‘living before eternity’...”

It’s all deceptively simply, but never simplistic. Jesus is teaching us how to live in this world, with all of its sometimes overwhelming challenges. Teaching us how to be so rooted and grounded in love that we will have the strength to withstand anything and that nothing in life or in death will ever be able to separate us from the great love of God in Christ Jesus.

In gratitude for that love, that gave us birth and carries through, over and beyond:

“Now thank we all our God, with heart and hands and voices, who wondrous things has done, in whom this world rejoices; who from our mothers’ arms has blessed us on our way with countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.”

Amen