

Sermon for May 12, 2019

"I Will Comfort You"

Isaiah 66:12-14

Staunton Church of the Brethren

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How about a few mother's jokes to begin our time. A little girl asked her mother, "How did the human race appear?" The mother answered, "God made Adam and Eve and they had children, and so was all humankind made ..." Two days later the girl asked her father the same question. The father answered, "Many years ago there were monkeys from which the human race evolved." The confused girl returned to her mother and said, "Mom, how is it possible that you told me the human race was created by God, and Dad said they developed from monkeys?" The mother answered, "Well, dear, it is very simple. I told you about my side of the family and your father told you about his!"

And then there's a police recruit who was asked during the exam, "What would you do if you had to arrest your own mother?" He said, "Call for backup."

Being Mother's Day, it is no surprise that the media has released a number of versions of "Best TV Moms." So, if you Google that phrase, you'll find lists of the best 10, best 15, best 20 and even best 50 TV moms of all time. These lists include the likes of Clair Huxtable from "The Cosby Show," Carol Brady from "The Brady Bunch," Lorelai Gilmore from "Gilmore Girls," Marge Simpson from "The Simpsons," Elyse Keaton from "Family Ties," Sophia Petrillo from "Golden Girls," Lynette Scavo from "Desperate Housewives," Ruth Fisher from "Six Feet Under," Peggy Bundy from "Married With Children," Marion Cunningham from "Happy Days" and others. Not sure what the characteristics are for "Best" on these lists.

Perhaps not surprisingly, these lists also prompted one site to produce a roll of the 10 worst TV moms. It's populated by mothers like the Dowager Countess from "Downton Abbey," Colleen Donaghy from "30 Rock," Claire Matthews from "The Following," Lois from "Malcolm in the Middle" and others.

One way to decide which list on which these TV mothers belong -- best mom or worst mom -- might be to answer two questions: If you were hurting emotionally, to which of these mothers would you go for comfort? To which of these mothers would you not go for comfort?

If you stopped 100 people on the street and asked them to describe God or what God looks like, many would use the word "father." They may even describe the stereotypical vision of God as an old man with a beard. Our language in Scripture encourages this outlook by usually referring to God as "He." But did you know that Scripture, in fact, has a number of passages which appeal to God with decidedly feminine imagery. In Isaiah 66, there's a striking verse where God, using maternal imagery, speaks to the generation of Israelites who have returned from the Babylonian exile to the ruins of Jerusalem. God says that the God of Israel is like a mother one can turn to: "As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem" (v. 13).

There are some who argue for a theology that includes not only a heavenly Father, but also a heavenly Mother. While there's little in the Bible to support that kind of separation of God into genders, it does have a special appeal to some. I, for one, know that my mother showed me the presence of God often; from my younger years when I would stand by the kitchen sink while Mom did the dishes and I could tell her anything and she would listen, to her dying days when she maintained such faith and dignity while battling a cruel disease.

Fortunately, we don't need to fight about God as father or mother, because the Bible, in this verse from Isaiah 66 and others, recognizes that in God, the paternal and the maternal are both present. This is perhaps emphasized in one of the names used for God in the Old Testament, *El Shaddai*, which first appears in Genesis 17:1, where God tells Abram and Sarai that they are to have a son. English Bibles usually translate *El Shaddai* as "God Almighty," but scholars say that's just a guess at its meaning. The *El* part of the name is the shortened form of *Elohim* and it means "God," but *Shaddai* is possibly derived from the Hebrew word *shad*, which is invariably used in Scripture for a woman's breast, the place where a child is cuddled and nursed, and so the name just might be a nod to the maternal side of God's nature. There is also

Deuteronomy 32:18, where Moses chides the disobedient Israelites, saying, "You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you; you forgot the God who gave you birth."

What's more, God's comfort is a strong theme in the Bible. Portions of two prophetic books -- Isaiah 40-55 and Jeremiah 30-31 -- are often described as "books of comfort," but the theme of God as comforter isn't limited to those texts. We hear it in many of the psalms, including Psalm 23: "Your rod and your staff -- they comfort me." In the New Testament, Paul speaks of God as "the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction ..." (2 Corinthians 1:3-4). And Revelation speaks of a final consolation for the people of God: "[God] will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away" (Revelation 21:4).

But the imagery here in Isaiah 66 communicates especially well: God comforts like a good mother comforts her child. Now, we know that fathers can also provide comfort -- and children need the tender love of a father every bit as much as a mother's. But we also know that when push comes to shove, when a knee is scraped or a hope dashed, children often will run first to their mother, sometimes holding back tears until they are in those arms; or crying until they reach those comforting hands. William Makepeace Thackeray once wrote: "Mother is the name for God in the lips and hearts of little children."

Having said that, we should note that in the Isaiah 66 verse, God was speaking and promising comfort to grown-ups. The hurts of childhood are fleeting, and often a hug and a few tender words are sufficient to supply the comfort needed. But the hurts of adulthood -- the pain of loss, worry, illness, the realities of the human condition -- are another matter. And for those, we might long for comfort and help, as effective as that which we found from our mothers in our early years. This is why all mothers know that comforting a child doesn't end when they go off to high school or college or even when they marry and have children of their own.

But how exactly does God comfort us? For one, God comforts us through the presence, care and verbal encouragement of other Christians. While there are some Christians who are especially good at that -- who have good listening skills and sensitivity -- encouragement is

something all of us can and need to do. One definition of comfort is "to stand alongside to lend support and encouragement when the situation cannot be changed." This is something most of us can do for others. And such "standing alongside" often helps those dealing with that which cannot be changed, to cope with the situation as it is. In many of these moments, the less words spoken, the better. Our presence can be enough. At other times, an encouraging word is needed and gives strength and courage to the other. Still other times, a casserole or a pie is a good idea, a good deed, an act of kindness. We spend far too much time tearing one another down when we need to be doing to others as we want them to do to us.

But, for two, God sometimes comforts us more directly. The psalmist said, "When my anxieties multiply, your comforting calms me down" (94:19, CEB). Interestingly, that verse is from Psalm 94, which bemoans the injustice of life and the arrogance of evildoers who seem to get away with their deeds. But the psalmist finds comfort in the confidence that God reigns and will deal with the inequities and wrongdoers in God's own time. This is why the writer can say: "Who rises up for me against the wicked? Who stands up for me against evildoers? If the Lord had not been my help, my soul would soon have lived in the land of silence. When I thought, "My foot is slipping," your steadfast love, O Lord, held me up." (94:16-18)

How God delivers comfort will vary, but it sometimes comes while we are in prayer. It is sometimes transmitted through a verse or passage that jumps out at us while reading the Bible. Or it might come over us as inner assurance in the midst of grief or trouble. Many of us can remember our mother's comfort. I know I do. On this day, some of us still have mothers we can call or mothers to whom we can send a card or bouquet of flowers. We are grateful for our mothers. We are thankful for their enduring and unconditional love. We are glad that when we were children we had mothers to whom we could run for comfort. Some of us have lost our mothers in body, though never in spirit, and they continue to care for and to teach us as we grow older and wiser.

But there are some who did not have such a mother, who lost a mother while young in life or whose experience does not align with God's description of a mother who comforts a child. This is something you would not wish on any child. You don't want children to have a

sense of loss. So, even the absence of such a comforting presence reinforces in a way the reality of it and of its power. Intuitively, whatever our experience, we understand the concept of a mother's comfort. God uses this metaphor to help us understand how God relates to us.

And so on Mother's Day, we can be thankful for our earthly mothers, and we are grateful to God for the comfort offered us if today we feel a sense of loss, or if our hearts are swelling with love. God's word to us doesn't leave too much room for misunderstanding. God says, "I will comfort you." Period.

Our response? Let's allow God to encircle us with the arms of love and mercy. Let's feel the comforting presence of the Almighty. Let's submit to the gentle touch and embrace of God as we are led through the rough patches of life. Let's relax and stop resisting God's firm and persistent efforts to draw us into the comfort of the divine presence. Amen.