

The Good Shepherdess 2
(Psalm 23, John 10:22-30)

5-11-25
Rev. James Koyama

At first glance you might think that the scriptures today force us to choose between singing the praises of Mothers and celebrating the Good Shepherd. But a second look tells you otherwise, because shepherding is what Motherhood is all about, and fatherhood also, for that matter.

The Good Shepherd is our perfect role model for parenthood, because he feeds and protects his sheep by enfolding them in God's love, which is exactly what good parents do for their children. As it says in John Chapter 3, "We love because God first loved us". And good parents know this and wrap their children in God's love first, before their children even know what love is.

Good parents know that as soon as their first child is born, their lives and their bodies become a sacrifice of love for their children, in imitation of the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep. And it is in listening to the familiar voice of Mom and/or Dad, that the children are led to the gate which leads into the safety and blessing of God's fold.

When we model our parenthood on Christ, the Good Shepherd, we participate in both his divinity and his humanity, because all Christian doctrine teaches that Jesus was fully of heaven and fully an earthly human being. And although our experiences of heaven are more fleeting and uncertain than his, we too pass the experience of heaven on to our children through our earthly bodies; through the work of our hands, the words on our lips and the light of love that shines into them from our eyes.

I think that the role parents play is so powerful, in part because when we are young children, we are not able to distinguish between our parents and God. Our parents begin as everything to us. They are both God-like and distant beyond our understanding and at the same time earthly, nearer to us than we are to our conscious selves. They seem to know everything and to be capable of everything. And we depend on them completely.

My Parents

If you don't mind, on this Mother's Day, I'd like to bring in fathers for a bit because I think that mothers are very often best understood when paired with the father; as part of a two person team. And I ask for your indulgence to turn to my own parents as an example.

I would say that my dad was a fairly open-minded person for his generation, but very traditional in his habits. He spent a lot of time in his study working, where we were not supposed to bother him. And this surrounded him with an air of mystery for us kids.

He also had an explosive temper that came and went quickly. And after his storms, which were often triggered by us kids, he and mom would talk in his office and then she would come out and sit with us and calmly explain his position and re-assure us that he loved us.

In my early years I did not feel very close to him. But as I grew older I came to appreciate him more. Whatever fear I had, became respect, because I realized how much even his moments of anger were driven by his love for us and his desire for our well-being. And while I don't think having a dad with a temper is necessarily a good thing for everyone, in my case, his anger made me pay attention, and I ended up with some valuable tools for life.

I think it is very likely that all of this led me later on to a certain appreciation of that important part of the Biblical Story, where God dwells on the holy mountain in a thunder cloud and Moses goes

back and forth, up and down the mountain and then delivers the 10 Commandments to the people.

Dad was God on Mount Sinai in my childhood; enveloped in a cloud of mystery, stormy and distant and engaged in a greater adult reality beyond our child-like understandings. He never threw the ball with me, never got down on the floor to play with me. And as long as he lived, I hungered for his approval, something that I don't think he was aware I needed. His own father died when he was only a child.

Mom was like a God for me in a different way. While dad was distant, she was very close to us kids in a comforting way; which was a blessing that we took for granted. She was the calm one who never blew her stack. If Dad was God on Sinai, she was Moses /Jesus going up and down the mountain, as the intermediary. She translated Dad's anger for us and her hugs and attention healed our wounds.

It was Mom's closeness to us that is so moving to me. She put salve on our scrapes, and kissed our boo-boos. She listened to us, when we felt persecuted by Dad. And there were many times when we

were sick or feeling low, when she would just hold us and pat us and stroke our hair.

These memories of slow time with her are very precious to me. I remember very well the sound of water gurgling through her intestines when I would lay with my head on her lap and my ear on her stomach. I remember her warmth and smell.

Mom was also the parent with the Octopus arms. If one or two of us started wandering away in public, it was her arms that brought us back in. She was our home base wherever we went and her constant attention held the family together.

I can't remember having any of these experiences with dad. The idea of laying my head on his lap was somehow ludicrous and out of the question. I don't have any memory of my father ever touching me with any affection, not even hand shakes, until we hugged sometime after his retirement. And he never had the job of corralling us kids. His role as breadwinner afforded him the luxury of not paying attention to us at all for long stretches of time.

When it comes to the question of which of my parents was most like the “Good Shepherd,” I have to say that it was Mom. While Dad, as a theologian, had many interesting things to say about Christian life, his faith was mostly intellectual, passionate and emotional, but more of a mental exercise.

Mom’s faith was more pious. She lived the self-giving love of Christ more than she talked about it. And the way she lived and behaved was more comfortably in her body. And while Dad’s best tool was words, the voice that contained the reassuring sound of the Good Shepherd’s voice for me was hers, because it was backed by her constant and reliable presence.

My mother had very simple taste in clothes and little interest in possessions. But she had a deep love of nature and music. She studied piano in college and was a piano teacher to the local kids. And she loved good literature, and read to us often from her favorite children’s books.

She was a kind, soft spoken, unpretentious mid-western farm girl who, after graduating from college, went to a missionary school in India, where she taught piano. On returning, she went back to

school where she married my father, a graduate student from Japan. This was barely 15 years after the Japanese surrender in World War II. Together, they went to Thailand as missionaries, then to Singapore and to New Zealand and finally full circle back to this country; all the while raising three kids.

Then when she was in her fifties, and her children had left home, she went to Seminary and became the minister of a small church in Syracuse, New York.

As I was writing this sermon, I thought to myself, “Would anyone want to know this about my mother?” And then I asked myself, “Would I be interested in hearing about the mothers past and present here in this congregation? And my answer was “Yes.”

I would be interested, because learning about someone’s mother tells you so much about the person who is doing the telling. I learned so much about Kip and the Dresser family, just in the few minutes Kip talked about his mother at her funeral, last month in Leyden. It was a moment of deep seeing into the heart of a family that was full with the love of God!

Every mother is different and some piece of the heart of every mother is rooted in the heart of God. And every mother has had a profound effect on the people in her care, so that learning something about her will shine a light on things that for them are essential and heartfelt.

And where there is a Mom and/or both a Mom and a Dad who worked together more or less successfully, there is also some powerful connection to the Biblical story. Whether we are hearing about the Good Shepherd, the disciples, one of the prophets, God on a mountain in Exodus, Paul, lepers on the roadside or Mary, the mother of Jesus, the Bible stories always shed a sacred light on our lives that reveals what is extraordinary in what we take to be ordinary and make consequential things are that we take to be inconsequential.

So a great big thank you to all you mothers this morning and to all the mom's in heaven; especially for the part you have played in making our ordinary lives extraordinary by sharing God's love with us. No words can describe how blessed we have been by your shepherding.