

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: May 13, 2012  
Sermon Title: Mothering  
Scripture: Ruth 1:8-17  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

## **Ruth 1:8-17**

*But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, 'Go back each of you to your mother's house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The LORD grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband.' Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. They said to her, 'No, we will return with you to your people.' But Naomi said, 'Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the LORD has turned against me.' Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.*

*So she said, 'See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.' But Ruth said, 'Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die — there will I be buried. May the LORD do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!'*

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A friend sent me a quote yesterday by A. W. Tozer, a noted Christian thinker. Tozer stated, "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us. The history of mankind will probably show that no people has ever risen above its religion, that no religion has ever been greater than its idea of God ... always the most revealing thing about the Church is her idea of God." (Tozer, A. W. *The Knowledge of the*

*Holy: The Attributes of God, Their Meaning in the Christian Life.* New York: Harper & Row, 1961. Print.)

So, what's your idea of God? As you can imagine, I am a keen observer of church life. I watch all those TV preachers. I've been a guest preacher and teacher in a thousand churches or more, and I'm a third-generation pastor myself. In my own family we've pastored some 160 churches in six denominations. And Tozer is right. What you think about God shapes what your church is like. Some folks think of God like a Judge, and their churches are very judgmental. Some think of God as King, and their churches are authoritarian. Some think of God as angry and wrathful; you listen to their sermons, and they're full of anger.

Our Bible study was invaded a few years ago by some members of a religious cult. For them, Jesus was hateful and angry, and when I wouldn't agree with them, they put a curse on our church. The link between what they believed about God and how they functioned as Christians was perfectly clear.

For me, I come down on the side of love. A. W. Tozer's statement was the perfect setup for my sermon today, which is about love. I actually put myself to the Tozer test. As soon as I saw the quote, I asked myself, "What comes into my mind when I think about God?" And the answer immediately was "love." And no matter how I framed the question, no matter what context I imagined, no matter what segment of my life I considered, "love" was the answer. It is certainly the heart and soul of the Christian story, from the most profound verse in the Bible: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son ..." to the simplest verse in the Bible: "God is love," period. Short, sweet, to the point. "God is love."

I always emphasize those verses at every wedding rehearsal. In fact, I practically give a mini-sermon or mini-Bible study at each wedding rehearsal, focused on St. John's statement about love.

"How great is the love that God has lavished upon us..."

"This is how we know what love is: Jesus gave his life for us..."

"Let us not love with words, but with actions..."

"Let us love one another, for love comes from God..."

"No one has ever seen God, but if we love one another, God lives in us and God's love is made complete in us..."

"We love because God first loved us..."

And then that resounding definitive statement on which I hang my whole life, my whole ministry, my whole church, my whole theology, my whole Christianity: I John 4, verse 16, "God is love."

Here's my own personal theory. Throughout the Bible, God tries every imaginable way to get through to people: Laws. Threats. Punishment. Disasters. Leaders. Kings. Heroes. War. Pestilence. Angels. Talking donkey. Jonah's whale. Even sorcerers. God tries every trick in the book, every parent's trick, every coach's trick, every boss's trick to motivate us, to guide us, to help us. And finally, I think, God just throws his hands up in the air and decides, "I'm just going to love everybody to death. That's it. Love." That's why I love that verse, "How great is the love that God has lavished upon us." "Lavish." That means "over the top," more than you need, more than you deserve, more than you can stand. Love, lavished upon you. Like a mother's love.

"Mother's Day" is about many things, but love is number one. We even talk about "a mother's love," recognizing that it is special, unique, something to embrace, something to remember, something to aspire to. We're not all mothers. We're not all females. But we all understand that motherhood and mothering and being mother-like are most extraordinary qualities.

I was at Mo's Wine & Spirits the other day and Mo, the owner and also member of our church, always has some cute or funny saying on a blackboard at the entrance. This week, it says, "Remember, buy your mother a bottle for Mother's Day. After all, you're the reason she drinks!" In a humorous way that reminds us that a mother's love is built on perseverance, sacrifice, even pain. Think of the little clichés we have about mothers: "a mother's work is never done," "my mother has eyes in the back of her head."

I remember one of the strangely dramatic events of my youth. I must have been 19 or 20, and I came home late at night, way late at night, and I sneaked quietly into the house, only to discover my mother was NOT waiting up for me! I was stunned. This was not how the world was supposed to work! I thought my job was to be irresponsible and exasperating, and my mother's job was to worry and stay up late, waiting! We expect mothers to be champions of endurance, smiling through the tears, going the extra mile, doing whatever is necessary ... plus some.

I've mentioned a couple of times this new Web site that our own Rick Fernandez has called "HooplaHa." <http://www.hooplaha.com/>, a Web site totally devoted to bringing a little happiness, a little "hoopla" into every day. This weekend, they did their first Mother's Day feature, using a group of

interviews with men talking about their mothers. And they just said what we've been talking about, and what we'd probably say ... "My mom was a hard worker her whole life ... she taught me so much ... she was always thinking about others before herself ... I'm thankful for everything she's done." Yes, a "mother's love" IS special.

It's interesting that when it comes to God, a lot of people still want to think of God as male and nothing else. The problem is, once we define God, we limit God to that definition. If we say God is 5'6", then God can't be 5'4" or 6'. If we say God is male, God can't be more than male. If we say God is mother, God can't be more than mother. Yet, it's true, it is useful and helpful to say that God is *like* a father and yet more. And God is *like* a mother, yet more.

You may remember taking the SAT. There would always be those questions that had a string of words, and you had to pick the one that didn't fit. So you could have "violin ... piano ... chocolate ... cello." Which word doesn't fit? We can do the same with God. "God is male ... mother ... King ... skateboard ... judge ... Lord." God is all of these except skateboard. God is male-like in some ways, mother-like, king-like, judge-like, Lord-like. Dare I ask what God is most like?

When we come to Jesus's life, we find him on his hands and knees, washing the Disciples' feet. We find him on the seashore, making breakfast for his friends. We find him on the Cross, giving his all for us. We find him embracing children and lepers and tax collectors, all the untouchables of his day. "How great was the love Jesus lavished on everyone!" A mother's love, if you will, not in a biological sense, but in a spiritual sense.

"Mother's Day" has evolved through the years, even in churches. When I was a kid, when you walked into church on Mother's Day, the ushers asked if your mother was dead or alive ... and then you were given a red or white flower, depending on whether your mother was still alive or not. The intent was lovely, I'm sure, but the impact was tough, really tough. So we don't do that here.

We've also learned to broaden and deepen and enrich our understanding of motherhood. That's why I often use the word "mothering." Mothering has nothing to do with progeny or biology or gender. Mothering is an approach to life, a spirit, an attitude, a gift. You can find it in an adoptive mother, a foster mother, an aunt, a scout leader, a coach, a teacher, a mentor, a neighbor. Someone with "eyes in the back of her head," whose "work is never done," someone who stays up late, waiting, who endures, perseveres, whose love is lavished upon you.

That's why I chose the Book of Ruth for our Scripture. It's the story of a mother-in-law, Naomi, and her daughter-in-law, Ruth. Not your typical love story, with all the jokes about mothers-in-law that permeate every culture. Naomi was Jewish, from Israel, but a famine sent the family into a foreign country. Her sons married foreign girls – pagans, outsiders, infidels, strangers, aliens. But they all got along, it seems; then one by one the males died: Naomi's husband, Naomi's sons, leaving Naomi alone with the two foreign daughters-in-law. Three sad, unhappy, lonely people, tied together by sorrow and custom.

Surprisingly, Naomi announces that she is returning to Israel and sets her daughters-in-law free. They don't have to take care of her. They are free to stay in their home country and follow their own path. At which point Ruth says to her mother-in-law, "Whither thou goest. I will go, wherever thou livest, I will live, thy people shall be my people, and thy God shall be my God." No longer tied together by duty or by marriage or by custom or by guilt, they choose to be united by love, by a shared, lavish love.

Something greater than most people's expectations, something greater than anybody's bottom line. A mother's love, even of the "in-law" variety. A love that surprises. Or in the language of our first hymn, a love that "excels."

I'll close by announcing a dramatic change in our church. For 77 years we've thought of the Dogwood Festival as centered on dogwood trees and dogwood blossoms. That's over. That's passé, and just in time.

We are in the middle right now of an almost Dogwood blossom-less Festival. Which is O.K. because, let's face it, the number-one draw for our festival is the ice cream man from Maine. For 10 years of Dogwood Festivals, people who came up to me had only one question: "Where's the bathroom?" For the last five years, the only question is, "Where is the ice cream man from Maine?"

Now, certainly, it's great ice cream. Sure enough. But people walk away talking about the man, the ice cream man. His spirit. His warmth. His kindness. Let's call it what it is: his love. Watch him talk with each customer. Listen to him talk about his ice cream or his life or his faith or his wife. His wife is a dear, delightful lady, and quite sick. Watch him walk with her around the church, arm in arm, gentle, supportive, just plain loving.

My son and I were talking with him on Friday about faith and life and love. He told us, "When you get up in the morning, before your feet hit the floor, be sure to put on your coat of warmth and kindness." Warmth and kindness,

two near neighbors to love, two marks of a mother's love. Two hallmarks of lavish love. Just the way God likes it.

Happy Mother's Day Love.