

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: May 8, 2016  
Sermon Title: Mother's Day 2016  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe  
Scripture: Scripture Litany

## MOTHERS' DAY SCRIPTURE LITANY

Leader: Holy and Loving God, you have taught us that the dear women of our lives are worthy to be praised, "for they have done excellently. The heart of her family trusts in her, for she does good and not harm . . . She provides for her family . . . she opens her hands to the poor, and reaches out her hands to the needy . . . she opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue." *(Prov. 31)*

People: Gentle God, today we celebrate our mothers; we give thanks for each and every woman who has blessed our lives with love, faith, wisdom, kindness, and nurture.

Leader: Holy and Loving God, you have taught us to honor our mothers and fathers, to help them to be glad, and to treasure our mothers' teachings. *(Ex. 20:12, Prov. 23:25, Prov. 1:8)*

People: Help us, Caring God, to honor the women of our lives. Help us to build a world where women are respected, cherished, safe, and set free to be all that you call them to be.

All: God, bless our mothers and grandmothers, aunts, sisters, and daughters. Bless every woman who gives life and care to a child: adoptive mothers and foster mothers, teachers and nurses, coaches and neighbors. Thank you for the witness and inspiration of Biblical women: Mary and Mary Magdalene, Ruth and Deborah, Lydia and Phoebe . . . and thank you for the inspiration of strong and faithful women today who lead us toward a world of caring and justice, hope, and peace. Bless them and each of us with your tender, mothering care. Amen.

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Mother's Day was very special in our Church when I was a child growing up. When you walked into Church, the usher asked whether your mother was living or not, and if she was alive, you got a red carnation; if she had passed, you got a white carnation. It wasn't until I was an adult and a pastor of my own Church that I realized how hard that was to separate the congregation into haves and have nots, those with mothers, those without.

I hadn't thought about it because I was walking into Church with my mother. I happily took one of those red flowers, never imagining what it was like for all the folks who had to tell the usher, "No, give me the white flower." As time went on, I became aware of other ways that Mother's Day could be tougher than planned. Not everyone's mother is alive. Not everyone had a mother they knew. Not everyone had a good mother. Not every mother is a biological mother.

We also have "Godmothers." We have foster moms and adoptive moms and stepmoms and even Den Mothers for Cub Scouts, a recognition that there is a whole multitude of women who are not related to us, who are not biological family, and yet their impact on our lives is profound, miraculous, life changing. Truth is, once we move beyond biology, the actual act of giving birth, then we are open to a whole world of people whose mothering qualities touch us deeply. Teachers. Coaches. Mentors. Neighbors. Even places and institutions.

Two years ago, my Mother's Day sermon was called "A Mothering Church." I talked about how our Church should emulate the qualities we admire in mothers. All over the world many refer to their nation as the "motherland," expecting that there will be an affection, a nurturing, a respect, a bonding between citizen and country that mirrors a loving family.

There's been a lot of debate this year on college campuses about the role of college in a student's life. Should college be a place where anything goes, do what you want, say what you want, don't worry about the feelings of others? One of our own beloved young women had the courage to take a stand, to say, "No," college is also our home, our family for these four years, there should be some of the sense of safety and peace and harmony that we expect at home that mothers work hard to provide.

I went away to boarding school and college, eight years back in the '60s, and those schools actually had a governing philosophy, "in loco parentis," *in place of parents*. My Northfield Mount Hermon School, my Colgate University, saw themselves providing a family framework. Somewhere in their institutional life they were giving us good parenting—some mothering,

gentle when necessary, stern and demanding when necessary, forgiving and patient when necessary.

I won't go into the gory details of my college failures, but I got kicked out after two years, did a semester elsewhere, worked hard, and my dean at Colgate let me back in with my scholarship intact. When I expressed both surprise and gratitude, he said, "What did you think? We are your family. We take care of our own." *In loco parentis*.

A lot of this is in a state of flux right now. Colleges aren't sure what their role is. And how many people think of America as our "motherland" and speak of America today with affection and respect and tenderness?

My larger point is that we yearn for *and* need the best of "mothering" all around us. And we don't have to define that to gender, job descriptions, traditions, and assumptions, or hidebound expectations. These have defined us through the ages, limiting opportunity, freedom, imagination. At our best, let's turn the power of mothering into every aspect of life.

Let's look at our extraordinary "Superwoman" Scripture from the Book of Proverbs, Chapter 31. Whenever I use these verses, Alida reminds me that I'm setting an impossible standard for women, and yet, there it is, a Biblical definition of a "good woman."

*She is far more precious than jewels.  
The heart of her family trusts in her,  
She does good, and not harm,  
all the days of her life.  
She works with willing hands.  
She rises while it is still night  
and works hard for her family  
She considers a field and buys it;  
she plants a vineyard.  
She girds herself with strength,  
and makes her arms strong.  
Her merchandise is profitable.  
Her lamp does not go out at night.  
She opens her hand to the poor,  
and reaches out her hands to the needy.  
She makes linen garments and sells them;  
Strength and dignity are her clothing,  
She opens her mouth with wisdom,  
and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.*

*And does not eat the bread of idleness.  
Her family praises her and calls her blessed.*

No wonder! She is industrious, successful, tireless, keen, kind, generous, dignified, wise, busy, and appreciated. Truth is, we all know someone like that, someone who lives life at a level that is full speed, broad, deep, amazing.

It may be your mother. It may be you. It may be some of your friends. Part of what is wonderful about this Scripture is that it is 3,000 years old, from an ancient Biblical Middle Eastern culture. And yet it is describing a woman respected in the town square, central to the business community, an entrepreneur, a visionary, a philanthropist, and beloved. A feminist and a capitalist, long before feminism and capitalism existed. Superwoman? Maybe.

I prefer balanced, integrated, well rounded. There is a spirit to what that "good woman" from the Book of Proverbs does, a certain spirit, an energy, a vision, an attitude. It does not have to be limited to women, but we honor it among women on Mother's Day.

There's a saying, "Every Mother's Day sermon is about the preacher's mother," and that's true. This "good woman" from Proverbs was my mother. She was tireless. She was visionary. She was respected. She was generous. She was wise. She was beloved. That's my mother. But I had a funeral yesterday for a family who grew up in our church, for their mom, and that was their mom too. And a week ago, I had the funeral for a dear elderly man, an old-time IBM executive, and that described him too.

And guess what—we have an excellent Boy Scout troop at our Church, a Boy Scout troop, run by men, and the fact is it is a bastion of mothering, the care, provision, energy, commitment, all those "mothering" qualities that make our Boy Scout troop excellent.

In the weeks ahead, I'm sure you'll hear plenty of stories from Alida and me about our Florence trip. And it occurred to me while writing this sermon that we were mothered every step of the way. Our host, Federico; our walking tour guide, Annalisa, our Chianti-tasting expert, Mateo; even the young man at the local coffee house where I started each morning—all these people "mothered" us. They hovered, they coached, they looked after, they anticipated, they smiled; they were just always there. I swear they did everything but tuck us in at night.

In your lifetime and mine, there have been some big changes, most still underway. And a big one is that gender is less important. Qualities, ability, character are more important.

In our recent Bible studies, we've been looking at the writings of St. Paul. For the past year, we've mostly been looking at his life. He was a religious fanatic, an itinerant missionary, the architect and builder of the early Church. He was aggressive, unrelenting, hard-edged, doctrinaire, "my way or the highway." But later in his life, his tone changes, he'd probably hit me for saying it, but he becomes more "motherly": encouraging, nurturing, nuanced, tender, peaceful.

So far, we've looked at two letters he wrote to Churches, conflicted Churches, problems, issues, whatever. And to each Church he offers a stunning list of . . . rules? No. Doctrines? No. Orders? No. Condemnations? No. *No.* He offers a stunning list of qualities. To the Galatians, he says, "You need to produce love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control." (Galatians 5) "*You need to produce love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.*"

And to the Philippians he says (and this is stunningly brilliant), he says, "Whatsoever is true, whatsoever is noble, whatsoever is right, whatsoever is pure, whatsoever is lovely, whatsoever is admirable, whatsoever is excellent . . . think about these things, and put them into practice." (Philippians 4:8-9)

Hear that again: "*Whatsoever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent . . . think about them, do them.*"

There's nothing macho, militaristic, or muscular in all those qualities, yet they come from the most macho, militaristic, muscular man in the whole New Testament! As Paul looks back on life, as he reflects on his faith, as he thinks about the Churches he started, he reaches for those qualities that are "mothering" at their best.

There's nothing in there that says, "Don't work hard," just be careful how you work. There's nothing in there that says, "Don't succeed," just be careful how you succeed. There's nothing in there that says, "Don't be ambitious," just be careful how you are ambitious. There's nothing in there that says, "Don't fight, "don't struggle," "don't stand up for what you believe," just be careful how you take a stand.

Mother's Day, "mothering" celebrates a way of being. And it's a way of being we can all be.

Our final hymn looks at some of those kinds of attributes that come from the Holy Spirit, "Breathe on Me, Breath of God," No 254.

*Breathe on me, Breath of God,  
fill me with life anew,  
that I may love what thou dost love,  
and do what thou wouldst do.*

*Breathe on me, Breath of God,  
until my heart is pure,  
until with thee I will one will  
to do and to endure.*

*Breathe on me, Breath of God,  
till I am wholly thine,  
until this earthly part of me  
glows with thy fire divine.*

*Breathe on me, Breath of God,  
so shall I never die,  
but live with thee the perfect life  
of thine eternity.*