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Date: May 14, 2017
Sermon Title: Mother's Day: Honoring Mary and Mothering
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Mother's Day Prayer Litany

Leader: Holy and Loving God, you have taught us that the dear women of our lives are worthy to be praised, "for she has 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. (Proverbs 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.

One of the best mothers I ever knew was a Catholic nun. She was about 60 years old, about 400 pounds, tough as nails, loud, pushy, demanding. I was a youth pastor in Massachusetts, and one of our ministries was a theater group. We put on big extravaganza Broadway musicals, involving hordes of teenagers. Every week that tough nun walked into our Church basement and mothered each kid to the best they could be. In those days, the high school cliques had their descriptive names (this was in the late '60s): the beeries, the jocks, the druggies, the Goths, the hippies, the preppies. But in that room, there was one mother who ruled the roost, who took each semi-formed, half-broken teenager under her wing, just as Jesus describes himself as a "mother hen, gathering all her chicks under her protective wing: mothering. (Luke 13:34)

This year is the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. The word "Protestant" comes from the word "protest." Protestants were protesters who protested against some things in the Catholic Church until some got kicked out and some got killed and some quit. And eventually, Christianity got divided up into what we see today: Roman Catholics, Orthodox (like Greek Orthodox and Russian Orthodox) and a thousand varieties of Protestants (and that's no exaggeration).

In the fall, our Adult Education board will sponsor some events about the Reformation, but I can summarize it for you right now: Catholics did a lot of bad stuff. Protestants did a lot of bad stuff. Catholics did a lot of good stuff. Protestants did a lot of good stuff. There's 2,000 years of history. Today, I begin with one "good stuff" the Catholics did: Mary. Mary, the Mother of Jesus.

You know Alida and I just returned from Europe—Vienna, Florence, the Czech Republic. We travel well together. We both love Italian wine, Viennese desserts, European art, and old, historic Churches. Most of those Churches are Catholic, and I think we visited every single one in Florence, most of them in Vienna, and the only one in the little Czech town we were in. And one thing is crystal clear, that Mary, the Mother of Jesus, is the undisputed "Queen of Heaven and Earth."

You look at the artwork, you look at the sculpture, you look at the altars, you look at the stained glass windows. Mother Mary is "Numero Uno." God is a big deal, yes. Jesus is a big deal, but mostly in two ways: as a baby in Mary's arms or dead in Mary's arms. Mary as *Mother* is the star. And when I say she is "Numero Uno" or the star, I'm not being disrespectful. I'm giving you a sense of the greatness, the grandeur, the significance of Mary as Jesus's mother. And when I say she has been elevated, I really do mean elevated. She is front and center, up there, way up there, above the altar, above the cross, above the saints. She is truly singularly honored. She is credited with guiding, nurturing, giving birth to, mothering the single most important event in human history: Jesus Christ. The Savior. The Messiah.

Around October, when we look at the Reformation, we can hash out all the differences between Catholics and Protestants, the things large and small that separated us 500 years ago and keep us apart now. If we want, we can look at Holy Communion, celibacy, married clergy, the pope and authority, the saints, Confession, Scripture, all the things that divide us, and Mary would be one of those things. I hate to say this, but for most of these 500 years, Protestants forced Mary far out of the way. We bring her back for the Sunday School Christmas pageant and then put her back in the closet for the rest of the year.

It really was, truthfully, part of Protestant anti-Catholicism. But the fact is everything Catholics did with Mary is rooted in the logic of her motherhood. People pray to Mary. There is the feast of the Assumption that celebrates Mary being taken straight up to Heaven, body and soul, without actually dying. There is logic to both. You want to get a message to Jesus, the incredibly busy Savior of the world? Try whispering in his mother's ear, she'll help out. And if Jesus is God, and God is omnipotent, God can do anything, why wouldn't God protect his mother Mary from death and allow her just to float up to Heaven? Protestants may choose to believe or not believe either one, but they make a certain sense, based on her stature as the mother of Jesus.

When I was playing baseball as a kid, we played against a lot of Catholic teams named for their local Catholic Churches and schools: Our Lady of Perpetual Help; Mary, Gate of Heaven; Mary, Queen of Heaven. I've preached at St. Mary's, Our Lady of Loretto, Our Lady of Guadalupe, Mary, Queen of Martyrs. And we all know Notre Dame. Who you think the "Dame" is? Mary! Those names all say the same thing: here's someone you can count on; in earthly terms, human terms, she's the best of the best.

Let me almost close with a segue: Mother's Day is a paradox. It is intensely personal. Yet it is thoroughly universal. It's personal in this sense. We all have mothers. Birth mothers, foster moms, stepmothers, adoptive mothers, even grandmothers. We all have somebody who gave birth to us, who raised us, nurtured us, some female whose role in our life was like Mary's—singular, special, unique, elevated above all others.

I was taught as a young pastor that every Mother's Day sermon is, at least in part, a testimony to the preacher's mother, and I confess that's true. When I talk about Mary being elevated above all else, close to God, God's best handiwork on earth, even an amateur psychologist knows I'm praising my mother also. Mother's Day is that intimate, that personal. But it is also universal. First, in the obvious sense, we are all born to somebody. But in a more important sense, mothering is truly a universal quality that transcends birth, family, even gender.

Down through the ages, in all societies, we've sort of come to a general acknowledgement that certain characteristics, certain abilities are *mothering*. "Eyes in the back of the head." No favorites. Unconditional love. Patience. Listening.

Last Sunday I told about my neighborhood growing up, where every woman on the block looked after every single kid in the neighborhood. I described it as having 110 mothers breathing down your neck, watching your every move, who'd slap you upside the head if you deserved it and patted you on the back if you earned it. They had the right to scold, praise, stop you on the street to check your breath for alcohol, check your pockets for cigarettes. They were the mothers. They weren't family. Some didn't even have kids, some weren't even married, some weren't even female! But, by golly, they mothered us half to death.

I suspect that's what Mary did for Jesus and a whole bunch of others in Nazareth when he was growing up. It is not in the Bible. There is next to nothing in the Bible about his growing up. But when we see how Jesus turned out, what he did with his life, what he taught, what he believed, we know he was blessed with good mothering, birth mothering, neighborhood mothering, Godly mothering.

I'm putting together my summer reading list for the Church. Every year in early June I put a list of books in your Sunday bulletin that I've read in the past year and recommend to you. One on this year's list is called *The Mothers*. It's about a gifted teenage girl growing up facing all the issues and drama and the challenges of life. The narrators are collectively "the mothers," the women in her Church who observe it all. They're like the Greek chorus in ancient plays who stay offstage but offer wisdom and instruction.

We are all Church mothers. We all have the experience and opportunity to shape the wonderful lives entrusted to us. Look at Wheatley, baptized a few minutes ago. In the years ahead, Church mothers will be everywhere in her life. When she goes to Appalachia with Alida, there will be two adults on her crew. When she's confirmed, she'll have a special mentor. In youth group, a dozen adults will greet her at the door every week. Throughout Sunday School, a dozen teachers will shepherd her faith. When she's in the school play or on the field hockey team, we will be in the audience or the stands, cheering her on.

That's what the village mothers in Nazareth did for Jesus. That's what the neighborhood mothers did on my block. That's what we will do for Wheatley and every youngster we can find.

Happy Mother's Day to all who do the mothering and to all who receive their mothering.

Let's close with a hymn that talks about that most excellent love, No. 517, "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling"

*Love divine, all loves excelling,
joy of heaven, to earth come down,
fix in us thy humble dwelling,
all thy faithful mercies crown;
Jesus, thou art all compassion,
pure, unbounded love thou art;
visit us with thy salvation,
enter every trembling heart.*

*Breathe, O breathe thy loving Spirit
into every troubled breast;
let us all in thee inherit,
let us find the promised rest;
take away the love of sinning,
alpha and omega be;
end of faith, as its beginning,
set our hearts at liberty.*

*Come, almighty to deliver,
let us all thy life receive;
suddenly return and never,
nevermore thy temples leave.
Thee we would be always blessing,
serve thee as thy hosts above,
pray and praise thee without ceasing,
glory in thy perfect love.*

*Finish then thy new creation,
and spotless let us be;
let us see thy great salvation
perfectly restored in thee;
changed from glory into glory,
till in heaven we take our place,
till we cast our crowns before thee,
lost in wonder, love, and praise.*