

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: May 8, 2022
Sermon: Our 'Mother's Day' Sermon
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

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.

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.

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.

Sermon:

Our 'Mother's Day'

David Johnson Rowe

Mother's Day has evolved in my lifetime and in my pastoral career. I certainly model much of my ministry after my father's, but I draw the line at Mother's Day.

When you walked into the church on Mother's Day, you were given either a red carnation or a white carnation, depending on whether your mother was dead or alive. I can't imagine how the ushers phrased it as they greeted each worshiper: "Hi! Is your mother still alive?" And if you took the wrong color flower, did an usher take it away and swap it for the correct one? What was it like to go to church the first Mother's Day after your mom passed away and you had to switch your carnation color? Sadly, I kept the practice going the first five or 10 years of my career, until I finally woke up.

My next wake-up call was the realization of adoption, and with that, how many adoptive mothers I had in my church. And on the heels of that wake-up call, I became much more aware of how many foster mothers were in my church. All of a sudden, I needed to take into account lots of moms and dads who took kids into their lives in lots of ways. And soon we had kids with two moms and kids with two dads, kids raised by grandmothers, stepmothers. Everywhere you looked, folks were stepping up to shape a youngster's life, to impact someone's life, to raise a fragile life, to love another life as if it was their own. In all sorts of ways, someone is a surprising mother. That's actually good news, even though it's sort of a disturbing Bible story I'm using to make the point.

In our Scripture lesson, Jesus is just starting out his ministry; he's causing an uproar, worrying his family. So his mother tracks him down. When the Disciples interrupt Jesus to tell him his mother is outside wanting to see him, he responds with, "Who is my mother? Whoever does God's will is my mother, my family." (Matthew 12:46-50)

Seriously, don't you just want to slap him, disrespecting his mom like that? Still, Jesus's statement is sort of good news. Jesus expands on the definition of "mother," beyond only gender and giving birth, but to something broader. He's not minimizing motherhood. But he is recognizing something we've talked about for years. That there is a quality we call "mothering," there is an approach to life we call "mothering," there is a way of being toward others that we call "mothering."

And every person here today or listening online can remember those wonderful people who “mothered” you in just the right way, at just the right time.

Let me prime the pump for you with my extra mothers. My aunts in Massachusetts. My male English Professor at boarding school. The male Dean of my college. Two elderly women in India, neither of whom spoke English. The male Bell Captain at my hotel in Bratislava who took care of me after a fall. My Old Testament Professor in seminary. And a number of you. Yes, you! You have shown those so-called “mothering” instincts at just the right time in just the right way toward me. Nurturing. Comforting. Patient. Attentive. Practical. Detailed. Encouraging.

The Bible gives us valuable insights into mothers. Beginning with Proverbs 31. For many of you, we have done the funerals for your mothers, wives, grandmothers, and we’ve read Proverbs 31, the definition of what the Bible calls “a noble woman,” “a good mother.” That Scripture highlights industriousness, generosity, wisdom, preparation, creativity, excellence.

And we get other role model mothers, like Naomi and Mary. Naomi is famous only as Ruth’s mother-in-law, but Naomi is the real hero of the Biblical story of Ruth. Naomi and her husband fled Israel during a famine, ending up as immigrant refugees in a foreign country. They settle in, get acclimated, their sons marry foreign girls. As time goes on, her husband dies, her sons die, and Naomi decides to return to Israel. At that point, she gathers her two daughters-in-law and releases them from any obligation, any responsibility, any guilt, giving them the freedom to stay home in their home country. Ruth is so touched by Naomi’s kindness that she chooses to move to Israel, proclaiming her love for her mother-in-law with those famous words, “Whither thou goest, I will go. Wherever thou lodgest, I will lodge. Thy people shall be my people. And thy God shall be my God.” (Ruth 1:16)

Ruth goes on to remarry, become a mother, and become one of the ancestors of Jesus—all because of the mothering love of her mother-in-law. And Jesus’s mother, Mary, an extraordinary example of the qualities we treasure in every mom, in every kind of mom: faith, first. Trust. Strength. Openness. Willingness. Resolve. And again, more faith. Moms and mothers of every kind, impacting our lives in every way.

When I was about 10, I got a rifle for Christmas. Fake—sort of. Wood. *But oh, so real. And so cool.* Bolt action. Leather strap. Three feet long. It looked like Gary Cooper might have used it in World War I, or Audie Murphy in World War II.

Seriously, if a teenager walked down the Post Road with that today, he'd get pulled over. So, of course, I took it everywhere, including to our Cub Scout meeting held at our Den Mother's house. Did you catch that? Our *Den Mother's*. The mother of our Pack of Scouts. Not related. But still our mother. Well, I got to showing it off, swinging it around, pretending it was a baseball bat, and I smashed her favorite lamp.

When my father heard about it, he was furious. I had to return the rifle to the toy store, no money back. Then I had to apologize and promise to pay for the rifle *and* for the lamp. "Oh, no, you won't," said my Den Mother to my embarrassed father, "How's the boy supposed to learn to swing if he doesn't practice? And it was a good swing! That lamp just got in the way, that's all." *Mothering*.

In seminary they try to teach you to preach, not easy to do with us in my day, a bunch of young arrogant know-it-alls. One tip they gave us is that every Mother's Day sermon is about the preacher's mother. That's true enough. Even while expanding the definition of mothering wide open, inclusive, there is still my mom, hovering over the sermon. And there is still your mom.

This week I was with a large number of elderly people—60 or more people over the age of about 85. At our gathering we reflected on Mother's Day with hymns and Scriptures and a message. In those settings my preaching style is very interactive. I preach some things. I ask some questions, I create some discussion, and this week it was about mothers.

I asked them to remember their mothers and to remember being mothers or being married to a mother. What comes to mind? And I ask you the same questions—what comes to mind? What memories, sounds, smells, what activities, what character traits, what puts a smile on their face? Well, let me tell you, everyone had ready answers. Right off the bat, they could remember certain foods, specific music, family vacations, familiar sayings, and their mother's perfume. For my mother: Swedish meatballs, Elvis Presley, Maine in August, and "Emeraude" perfume.

And what put a smile on her face? Anything we kids did she could be proud of. Which leads to a funny story: When I was 8, I became a junkie, back when "junkie" was something different. I'd get up early on Saturdays and scour the streets of Queens for people's garbage, collecting newspapers, scrap metal, and making money. My mother belonged to the Women's Fellowship in our church and at the annual Mother's Day luncheon, each mother bragged on her kids. So, for a couple of years, she would pridefully tell about hard-working me, up early every Saturday, collecting and selling junk.

But one year my mom says, "You know, I can't keep saying my son is a junkie. Can you find a new job?" Remember, at this point I'm 12 years old. And I become a "Fuller Brush Man," with a dignified carrying case full of grooming supplies, a door-to-door salesman, soon adding a line of greeting cards. My mother smiled for a whole year.

What got me thinking in this odd vein is I want us to celebrate all the vast range of mothering that goes on in our lives *and* celebrate our mothers. And what got me thinking about that is today's Baptism. It's extra nice when a family asks to have a Baptism on Mother's Day, just like doing one on Christmas Pageant Sunday, both so perfect, and the symbolism and the reality, the beautiful visual, a "Holy Family" tableau before our very eyes, and I mean that quite seriously. And every Baptism family plays out all the mystery and wonder and joy and miracle of Christmas right here with us at the front of our Church, enjoying every moment of it.

So I found myself thinking about young Daniel James and his mom, Melissa. What a perfect Mother's Day for them! So that's got the Mother's Day emphasis taken care of. Happy Mother's Day to Melissa and little Daniel James. You are a Mother's Day gift! For all your lives you will connect Mother's Day and Baptism. That's really cool. And then I remembered that sometimes we printed timelines in the bulletin for the baby being baptized, so for Daniel, it would read as follows:

Baptized	2022
Starts Sunday school	2024
Children's choir	2026
Alida's youth group	2031
Confirmation	2035
First Appalachia trip	2036
Junior Deacon	2038

Plus life beyond our Church doors: kindergarten, sports teams, camping trips, music lessons, driver's license, prom. Every step of the way, every day there will be the influence of a host of mothers, some formally and officially, some like a grandmother or Godmother, and some just because. Just because they are there. Just because they are. Just the right person at just the right time.

"Who is my mother?" Jesus asked. "Whoever does God's will—in any way for any child of God, period.

Happy Mother's Day to all who mother our world!

Remembering (*in unison*)

We remember

favorite meals

eyes in the back of her head

patience

a knowing smile

affirmation

anticipation

tradition

generosity

love.