

“The Truth About Mothers”
Mother’s Day
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Mother’s 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 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.

At last! A non-partisan, political punditry, tailor-made for Mother's Day! A Wall Street Journal columnist wrote: "Biden and Trump ignore a mother's wisdom: Think before you speak – dummy." (March 30, 2023, p. A15, Daniel Henniger)

I bet we could all come up with some wisdom passed on by mothers, whether our own, or from the neighborhood. One of my favorites, and I use it all the time, whenever someone said something wise or urgent, one of the mothers would say "from your mouth to God's ear." It was a form of affirmation and prayers at the same time! We also have indisputable truths about moms. Mothers really DO have eyes in the back of their head. And mothers DO know what you do wrong even before you decide to do it. That's a fact. Is this Nurture or Nature? I have no idea – it is just so.

Today, as we talk about our mothers, what may also come to mind is the full range of motherly examples from a wide range of motherly people; a grandmother, a favorite aunt, that just right teacher at just the right time in your life. All of these shore in our Mother's Day thoughts.

When Alida and I were in Rome (you're going to hear that phrase a lot this next year, I promise you!), we saw the original Michelangelo "Pieta," the magnificent marble structure of the dead Jesus, having been taken down from the cross, lying now lifeless in the arms of his mother, Mary. The word "Pieta" means "pity," and yet it's stronger than that. This is pathos, heart-wrenching and broken-hearted grief, speechless agony of the soul. Mother and son

together. One last embrace. Awful. And yet beautiful. Powerful in its own way. Dare I say “hopeful?” Through the tears, even through the anger, dare I say “hopeful?” Yes.

That is the nature of motherly love. There’s not a broken person anywhere, anytime, who became whole again, who can’t look back at mother, or grandmother, some key woman who never stopped believing in you. Some coach, teacher, friend, aunt – related or not. Someone, like Mary in the “Pieta” who could make the worst of all days seem beautiful.

I first saw the “Pieta” in 1964 at the World’s Fair in Flushing, Queens next to the Met’s old “Shea Stadium.” The sculpture was the centerpiece of the Vatican Pavilion, you entered on a moving sidewalk that took you past this magnificent, emotive display of love and sorrow joined at the hip. Last summer, Alida took us to the Duomo Museum in Florence, behind the great cathedral and there you have two more “Pietas” by Michelangelo with Botticelli’s haunting “Mary Magdalene – The Penitent,” just a few steps away. The penitent, clearly suffering Mary Magdalene radiates love. The sorrowful love of Mother Mary transcends the horror of death.

A motherly, mothering, mother’s love superior to all of life’s woes. We’ve all seen it somewhere in someone, somehow. Just one of many reasons we’ve made it a goal to really build Mother’s Day Sunday into a most significant worship experience.

We do that in ways that are Biblical, ‘theological’ and let’s admit it, above all personal. Indeed, there’s nothing more universal than mothers. We are all born of a mother, we were all

raised by one kind of mother or another: birth mother, foster mother, grandmother, stepmother, adoptive mothers, and, in my life, all the neighborhood mothers. They were a formidable group, a network of motherly women with eagle eyes who never missed a thing.

When I was 19, my parents left me alone in our house in Queens for a month, they always went to Maine for August, and they figured I was old enough. My mother left 200 Swedish meatballs in the freezer, what else was needed? So, off they went. This was before cell phones and their farm in Maine didn't have a phone. So, I was on my own. After 31 days, my folks returned and Mrs. O'Grady, from across the street came by to talk to my parents. She had a calendar. With great flair, dramatic pauses, raised eyebrows, she went through every day of that August, pointing out every time I left the house, at what time, what time I returned and with whom and when they left. Plus, any evidence of drink or food, other than Swedish meatballs, put out with the garbage. Thirty-one days of my life, itemized by a group of neighborhood mothers, tag-teaming my every movement. Nowadays, we'd call them busy-bodies, snitches! But in those days? We understood, they were all collectively our mothers.

Biblically, mothers and women were often anonymous, forgotten, or shunted aside. Eve. Yes, Eve. We forget about her as a mother. There's Ruth. Mother, widow, immigrant. Jesus' own mother, Mary, whose life was a blend of pride, joy, fear, sorrow, mystery...and love. Much like most mothers. It's never clear sailing no matter what level of mom you're at. And there's Mary Magdalene, the great mystery woman of the Bible, easily the most misunderstood and

underappreciated woman in the Bible. Among these Biblical women, some mothered by birth. Some mothered a nation. Some mothered our religion into being.

Theologically, OK, here's the place you get to squirm, theologically God is androgynous, male and female, both, and neither. God is King, Lord, Judge, male, male, and male. Yet God is the major creative force in the universe, bringing forth into life all of creation, giving life to all that breathes, the very definition of motherhood. Birthing life. Nurturing life. And when God is looking for a self-description, God is likened to a "mother hen gathering her chicks." And, when God is wanting to give hope to Israel God says, "As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you..." (Isaiah 66:13)

To put it in modern language, God is not afraid of His feminine side. Taken all together, the Biblical, the theological, the personal, we've got good reason to make Mother's Day Sunday super special. It is innately connected with God every which way.

Early in my career I was stymied for a Mother's Day Sermon, so I called my father, asked him what to preach. "When in doubt, preach Rizpah." I had no idea what he was talking about, which led me to an obscure, horrific story in 2 Samuel 21.

Israel was a troubled country, lots of divisions, civil wars, tribal conflicts, power struggles. King Saul had made a mess of the country. Saul's successor, King David, was trying to hold the nation together, so he gave in to an ugly request from a troublesome ally, the

Gibeonites, who demanded bloody revenge against King Saul's family, in order to have a peace treaty. They wanted two of King Saul's sons and grandsons to be killed and their bodies left to rot in public, as a punishment against the royal house of King Saul. King David agreed, the seven royal males were killed. Enter Rizpah. Rizpah was the mother of Saul's two executed sons. For six months, Rizpah stood watch over the seven bodies, day and night, hot or cold, fighting off vultures, keeping away all predators who would desecrate those bodies. Finally, her witness as a mother, her heartbroken, staunch witness, standing guard over those bodies all that time, softened the hearts of King David and the Gibeonites, until finally the dead men were allowed to be buried in peace.

My father grew up in the 1930's and 1940's, me in the 50's and 60's, so this tragic but heroic story reflects the sensibilities of those times, I'm sure: Mother as strong, silent, sacrificial, tireless, unheralded. This was before women as CEO, Admiral, General, owner, General Manager, Executive Director; before women in the corner office, in the Senate, in all arenas of life, excelling and leading. And yet, even in our world, whoever takes on these mothering responsibilities, whether born to the responsibility or choosing the responsibility, whoever takes it on... they walk in the footsteps of Rizpah. That single-mindedness of purpose, that long-suffering willingness, that inner strength, that unbending ethic, that unconditional love.

I read this week about a couple in Massachusetts – they'd gone to a family outing at a waterpark, returned home, saw a package on their front porch. Turned out to be a car seat with

an infant in it! In an instant, they turned into mothers: the emotional bonding, the responsibility, the love. However, we came into mothering, whether we choose it, or it is thrust upon us or bequeathed to us – we have to aim for what makes mothers special.

Mother's Day weekend has certain traditions: strolling the Dogwood Festival grounds, arm in arm with Mom or Grandma, and shopping for something special. That's a big tradition around here. Breakfast in bed is old fashioned, but still popular – a family's way of saying "Mom, we know we drive you crazy all year long – just know we love you!"

In our family, one Mother's Day tradition is to have me alone for two hours while I watch the old classic movie "I Remember Mama." A lovely, loving 1948 movie about a Norwegian immigrant family in San Francisco, traversing the travails of poverty, sickness, family sorrows, tough times, AND doing it all with those qualities we see in Moms: grace, wisdom, patience, strength, positivity. What you see for two hours from the film "Mama" is: "I got this. We can do this. I believe in you," with a push, a nudge, an encouragement. We see her as focused, mournful, determined, unbowed. Think with me just a bit more about Mary.

The darkest day in Christian history we call "Good Friday," the day Jesus died that awful death on the cross. However noble his death, however grateful we are for all his sacrifice, however central we have made it to our religion, Mary was there as a mother. Have I mentioned that Alida and I were just in Rome?! Only the last four Sunday sermons in a row!! For us, all our visits are lots and lots of churches, and since mostly we are in mostly Catholic

countries or cities (Italy, Spain, Paris, Vienna, Prague) we are constantly in Catholic churches. Which means we are immersed in, surrounded by Mary at every turn. Perhaps our most impressive worship service ever, overseas, was at the Basilica de Santa Maria Maggiore, the Basilica of Saint of Saint Mary Major. Which means, point-blank, she's a big deal. She's "Major."

In statuary, art, sculpture, on side chapels, painted on the vaulted ceilings on the high altar, Mary rules. Quite literally. She sits on a throne. Her foot rests on an orb of the earth. She's accompanied by saints and angels. Jesus rests in her arms as a newborn, Jesus sits on her lap as a toddler. At the crucifixion, Mary stands at the foot of the cross, her dignity borne of faith and love. Then Jesus lays in her arms at death.

And all this adoration is because? She's a mom. Alida and I can do a better job explaining the whys and wherefores of Mary becoming so central, and the cultural application and the logical implementation, her status as a near God-figure, and paradoxically, what this has to do with all-male clergy in lots of Christianity. But I'm just zeroing in on the emotional bond between Mary and centuries of worshippers: Mary as Mom.

In our pastoral ministry we have been with so many of you at the toughest points in life. We've been with you as Moms when your child was in the Emergency room, in a hospital bed, the ICU. Just this year, Alida has been with two moms of three babies who spent a total of four months in the neo-natal ICU. We've been with moms standing with their husbands facing

challenges, guiding, and guarding their teenagers. And watching over aging parents through all the twists and turns of lives coming to an end.

It turns out the Renaissance man was most probably a woman; and a Jack of all Trades was most assuredly, Jane. Sometimes we act like this is all new, a sign of the times, but it has always been true. Look in the Bible, Proverbs 31, written 3000 years ago, it is this marvelous description of a woman:

She's industrious, successful, visionary; she's generous, wise, valued; she's an influencer...she's a blessing.

So, we come back to Mary. Mary Maggiore. Mary, the Major one. Why so important? I don't think it's the holiness, the supernatural. I don't think it's any of the theology or miracle attached to her. In the midst of all the "hoopla" and "hullabaloo" of Christianity and the Bible and Jesus Himself, and I believe most of it. I'm a fairly conventional, orthodox Christian, I'm a believer. In the midst of all that, is this Mom, a very real, very relatable Mom. She's there at the Christmas, beginning with all of it, mystery. She's there at the Good Friday, end with all its horror, she's there at the post-Easter sequel with all its wonder.

When we look at Jesus' life, which we know a lot about and we look at Mary's life, which we know little about and we look at early Christianity which we know something about, and we look at Mary's participation, which we know nothing about. But we know this – we look at Mary and we can say with confidence "somebody's got my back."

That's a mother, then and now.