

## An Unconditional Love

There are a few Sundays every year on which I approach the preaching task with some anxiety. One of them is Mother's Day. It's not a religious holiday, and, to be honest, you can only tie just so many faith lessons to motherhood and Mother's Day. Also, after preaching on 35 Mother's Days, 9 of them here, it's getting harder to come up with something fresh.

A sermon writer in Proclaim magazine wrote about the problem, too. He wrote:

*As ministers, we're reminded not to get too sentimental about motherhood because:*

*(a) for some, motherhood is an accident, and not always a welcome one;*

*(b) for some, biological motherhood isn't possible;*

*(c) for some, their mothers weren't all that nice;*

*(d) for some mothers, motherhood under the very best of circumstances is still less than a bed of roses and a primrose path.*

Also, while most of us who preach try to keep one eye on the clock so we don't preach too long, this is even more true on Mother's Day when we're aware that some of the folks in the pew have dinner reservations at restaurants and anything over 15 minutes is going to strain their ability to stay in their pew.

So there are some minefields one must recognize when undertaking to preach on Mother's Day.

So, recognizing that not every mother is a great mother, and not every mother/child relationship is the stuff of poetry, we preach to the ideal, to the situation in which a mother is the kind of person God intends her to be.

The same writer in Proclaim said this, too, which resonated with me: *If I can take some liberties with poet Wilhelm Busch's words, I'd have to say: "Eine Mutter zu werden ist nitch schwer; (Mutter) sein dagegen sehr." (To become a (mother) is not so difficult; on the other hand, being a (mother) is very much so!)"*.

Having been in the labor and delivery rooms with my wife, Bonnie, at the births of 3 of our children, I would take issue with the first part of Brother Busch's statement. From my perspective, it looked very difficult to become a mother. In fact, I've often said that if the fathers had to bear and deliver the children, our son, Christopher, would be an only child.

But I know Busch is right on the second part. Being a mother to a child is a difficult, lifelong job. One of the things that make it so challenging is the unique and special love good mothers have for their children. I am not one who subscribes to the radical feminist philosophy that men and women are the same. I believe we each have gifts, different gifts, and that we bring those different gifts to any human endeavor. That is nowhere more evident nor more important than in marriage and raising children.

In the almost 37 years since we first became parents, I have observed that my wife's love for our children is different from mine – not greater or lesser, but different. It has always bothered me far less than her to discipline our children, for example. I have always been stricter with our four kids than she was. I don't know

why this is; I just know that in our case it was so, and I would be willing to wager that we were not unique.

Perhaps the best way to say it is that our children got the closest experience of what God's love is like from my wife. Do we both love them unconditionally? Yes, but I know that her love for them is more like God's love for them.

I don't even know how to describe that or quantify it. I'm just grateful for it. Our children know that the sky may fall, but their mother will still love them; they may mess up in the worst way, and their mom will welcome them home with open arms. They know, I think, that I might require an accounting, but Mom won't. She'll just love them.

The American writer Washington Irving put it this way:

*The love of a mother is never exhausted. It never changes--it never tires--it endures through all; in good repute, in bad repute, in the face of the world's condemnation, a mother's love still lives on.*

So it is with God. He loves us with a love we can't describe or quantify. It literally is behind our comprehension. He is holy, pure, and just, but He is merciful, compassionate and forgiving. So complete, so intensive is His love for us that He took on our form to take the punishment for our sins for us. He endured agony of body and spirit we can only guess at so that we could be with Him forever. So much did He not want to have to punish us, that He took the punishment in our place. That's how unconditional His love is for us.

Recent events give us a unique opportunity to grow in our understanding of God's love for people. As incomprehensible as it

is to us, as beyond our ability to understand it as it may be, God loved Usama bin Ladin. Granted He didn't like the path bin Ladin took with the life God gave him, but God loved him as he loves you and me, as you would love your child even if he or she made bad choices. You would disapprove of their choices but would you not still love your child. Jesus, our Savior, died for Usama bin Ladin no less than for you and me. And until the moment that a bullet ended his misspent and violent life, Jesus wanted him to repent and believe in Him so that he, too, could be in heaven. And if he had repented, if he had fallen on his knees in front of those courageous SEALs and confessed his faith in Jesus Christ and meant it, he still would have died, but there would have been rejoicing in heaven and he would have been welcomed joyfully.

That's the incomprehensible, mysterious, complete, unconditional love of God. Notice I didn't say God's love was fair; it's not. If it were, there would be no hope for any of us and we would all be looking forward to joining bin Ladin in hell.

For not one of us deserves the love of God, the grace of God, or what Jesus did for us on the cross. Not one of us deserves to share in the victorious resurrection of Jesus from the dead anymore than bin Ladin did. We are all guilty of sin – not in the same way as he was, but guilty, nonetheless, of breaking every one of God's commandments.

The love of God reaches out to all people with the promise of forgiveness through faith in Jesus Christ as a free gift. Anyone, ANYONE who turns to Jesus in repentance and faith is forgiven, washed clean by His blood, and made a child of God by baptism. No one, NO ONE, is too evil, too bad, too reprehensible, or

beyond the reach of God's incredible love and forgiveness – except those who reject it.

You quite possibly experienced that unusual, one-of-a-kind love type of unconditional love first from your mother. It was a taste, a foreshadowing of the love of God in your life.

John Killinger wrote this:

*I believe in the love of all mothers, and its importance in the lives of the children, they bear. It is stronger than steel, softer than down, and more resilient than a green sapling on the hillside. It closes wounds, melts disappointments, and enables the weakest child to stand tall and straight in the fields of adversity.*

*I believe that this love, even at its best, is only a shadow of the love of God, a dark reflection of all that we can expect of him, both in this life and the next.*

So if your mother showed you that kind of love, give thanks to God, and, if you still are able, thank her, too.

But, above all, give thanks to God for His mysterious, incomprehensible, magnificent, unconditional love for you.

Amen.