

"GIFTS TO CHERISH"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

I wish Mother's Day were on a Wednesday. It would be a lot easier for me. Every May it comes around on a Sunday, so I have to do something with it. If we were to give out orchids on Mother's Day, that would take some of the pressure off me. At least some of you would go home with something. It's not that I have anything against mothers; it's just that I've never been able to understand what Mother's Day had to do with the worship of the Church.

DEVELOPMENT

I've researched it. I tried to find something in the Bible about mother^s..something I could preach on, some text. There's not much there. "Honor your father and your mother", but I've already preached a couple of sermons on that. Then that passage from Proverbs, about a good wife. "A good wife, who can find; she is more precious than jewels". Then it goes on to describe a poor woman who works her fingers to the bone to please her husband. I wouldn't touch that one. Most of you wouldn't want me to.

And then there's the Ruth and Naomi story. A beautiful story. I once did a sermon on that, but that's not about mothers. If anything, it's about mothers-in-law. I heard that somebody suggested that we have a Mother-in-law Day, but nothing ever came of it. However, it's really not even about mothers-in-law. It's about overcoming racial prejudice. I've preached on that, too. So that's about it in the Old Testament.

In the New Testament, it's worse. Poor Mary. Jesus paid precious little attention to His mother. When it was pointed out to Him that His mother and brother were standing outside, waiting to talk to Him, He ignored them. He rebuked them, really, then pointed to the crowd and said, "Here are My mother and My brothers". I can't use that. According to John, Mary, mother of Jesus, was present at the crucifixion. Jesus said to John, the Beloved Disciple, "Son, behold thy mother" and to Mary, "Mother, behold thy son". He was giving John the responsibility of looking after His mother. Not much in the New Testament either.

So I looked at the history of the Church. There's never been a Mother's Day listed as a festival of the Church. There are many saints days honoring women, but very few of them were mothers. They were honored because they were single-minded in their devotion to following Jesus, and that prompted most of them to remain single.

Someone suggested that Susannah Wesley, mother of John and Charles, should be honored on Mother's Day. Sort of the holy mother of our denomination. And she was a remarkable woman. In fact, she was a sort of "super" mother - she had nineteen children. And she, herself, came from a family of twenty-four children. Her father couldn't remember how many children he had. He said, "I don't know whether I have two dozen children or a quarter of a hundred." At any rate, Susannah's nineteen was no big deal in her family. Ten survived infancy, three boys and seven girls. Two of her boys, Charles and John, were geniuses, the rest led relatively miserable lives. Her method of childrearing would not be accepted gladly in the 20th century as a model. She believed she had to break her children's wills in order to save their souls. That was the first rule she used in child-rearing, which I take to mean that children shouldn't behave as children. Life, she taught them, is serious business. They ought to be at the

business of saving their souls with no room for play. So I don't think Susannah would be a very good model...not much help on Mother's Day.

Well, that's it. The Bible is quite silent about mothers. There are no liturgical precedents for the holy day of Mother's Day, and history offers only ambiguous models. So what's a preacher to do?

ORIGIN OF MOTHER'S DAY

I looked up the origin of Mother's day. It's interesting. It's the result of the work of a single-minded crusader named Anna Jarvis, from Philadelphia. She taught school in West Virginia for a couple of years and then returned to her home in Philadelphia to begin her real vocation in life, which was to take care of her mother. Her mother was a very religious woman, taught in a Methodist Sunday School in Philadelphia for twenty years. Anna Jarvis sacrificed her life in devotion to her mother. When her mother died, in 1905, Anna Jarvis brooded over the loss for several years and over how neglectful grown children are of their mothers.

She decided to do something about it and conceived the idea of Mother's Day, a day in which children would pay homage to their mothers. If they were neglectful the rest of the year at least on this one day children would be thoughtful of their mothers. So on May 10, 1908 she instigated Mother's Day services in two churches: the one in Grafton, West Virginia where she was affiliated when she taught school, and the other in Philadelphia, the Church where she and her mother had their membership. Those two services were the two first Mother's Day services, but they were really services in honor of Anna Jarvis' mother.

Then she began her crusade, spending the next few years writing incessantly to congressmen, to influential businessmen, governors of states, editors of papers, trying to get them to accept the proposal that a day be set aside to honor mothers both living and dead. And gradually she began getting results. In 1910 three states declared Mother's Day to be a holiday. The year after that, all the other states followed suit. Encouraged by this, in 1912 she organized the Mother's Day International Association. By 1914 President Wilson had declared the Second Sunday in May as a national holiday and said that the flag should be flown on all government buildings, and all citizens were encouraged to set aside that Sunday to have a public expression of love and reverence for mother. That's how it happened. Anna Jarvis finally got the Nation to shape up.

A GOOD CAUSE

It's a good cause, Mother's Day. Some children are shamefully neglectful of their mothers. Mother's Day shames them into doing what they should be doing all along if they'd been thoughtful. So, it's a good thing - Mother's Day. I just wish it were on Wednesday, not Sunday.

And for this reason. I've noticed that putting Mother's Day on Sunday making it part of the worship of the Church, tends to venerate, even worship mother. That's the problem. Church is where we worship God. It's kind of the same problem I have with national holidays on Sunday. Neither mother nor nation is worthy of worship - gratitude, yes; loyalty, yes; worship - no. We are to worship God, and have no other gods before us. So if we were to put it into proper perspective it would be on a day other than Sunday; then we wouldn't be so tempted to worship mother.

Worship of mother has led to a few problems. It's put a burden on women

that really shouldn't be there. Mothers are human beings. They do the best they can. That's all we have the right to expect of any human being - to do the best they can. I don't know how many women I've heard say, "I haven't been a good mother", when they had been! They were measuring their performance over against an idealized image of mother with a capital M, on a pedestal. The kind of thing you see on Mother's Day cards.

The combination of Anna Jarvis and Sigmund Freud have made it very hard to be a mother. It's tempted mothers to blame themselves for whatever their children do. There's some truth in that but it's a half truth at best. It may explain something of why you are the way you are, but it doesn't excuse for continuing the way you are.

There's another problem that results from worshipping mother. Philip Wylie called it "momism". That word has now become a part of our vocabulary. It means neurotic dependence on mother reenforced by guilt. It results in the inability of people to live autonomous adult lives. They are dependent on mother and mother manipulates them with feelings of guilt. Like the advice that somebody gave mothers: when your children call you on the phone and ask you how you are, moan a little. You won't know what they've done to make you suffer, but they will. That's "momism" and a lot of that is encouraged by observing Mother's Day on a Sunday and making mothers an object of worship. Honor your mother, especially in her old age. I think that's what the commandment means, incidentally. Honor your parents in their old age, care for them, but don't worship them. Let mother be a human being and you take responsibility for your own life.

THE CHURCH HAS HELPED ME OUT

Now the Church has helped me out of this dilemma on Mother's Day. It has designated the second Sunday in May as "The Festival of the Christian Home", so that's what I want us to take a look at this morning. What is it that constitutes a Christian home? I want to suggest that it's a home that gives us roots. It roots us in the love with which God loves us.

We already associate families with roots. We know that's what families do for us; they give us roots. They give us a means of knowing who we are. A means of knowing we belong to something and that we are important as individuals. Ever since Alex Haley we have been conscious of how important roots are for receiving dignity as human beings. We saw in that story that one of the most pernicious and dehumanizing aspects of the institution of slavery was that it broke up families. They wouldn't let the slaves be in families because without family you have no roots, without roots you don't know who you are. You're a nobody, and you're more likely to let others treat you that way, if you don't have roots. Families perform that function for us. Aunts and uncles, grandpas and grandmas, those photographs on the walls of stern ancestors. Marvelous stories about the family. Those are the roots that give us stability as persons.

But there's another and more important way in which families can give us roots, and that's to rear us in such a way that we will know that we will always be loved, no matter what. And that's harder. It's hard because parents are caught in the double bind between loving their children and holding great expectations for them. And often that gets mixed up, so that love is given only when expectations are met. And then it isn't love any more. It's a reward. It's remuneration for services rendered. I'll love you if you get good grades.

I'll love you if you shape up. I'll love you if you will become the person I dreamed that you would be. That's the way it comes out. I don't think any parent intends it to be that way, but sometimes that's the way it comes out.

Some carry that same way of thinking into religion. They think God treats us that same way. It's called a system of rewards and punishment. If you behave, then you go to heaven. If you meet this test, then you'll be in the kingdom. If you believe this creed, or if you follow this formula, then you will achieve salvation, and you will be saved. A lot of people believe that and Jesus came to contradict it. That's why His teachings were such a shock to good people. Especially His parables in which He said a prodigal son is loved by the father just as much as the righteous son. They couldn't believe that - that's not right. Or a shepherd would leave the ninety-and-nine and go looking for the one lost sheep because he loves the one as much as he loves those that stay at home and are righteous. He told parables about banquets where people who were "unworthy" were invited to sit down with the "worthies". People objected to that - that's not right; it's not righteous. Jesus said but it's the way God is. He treats us not like a judge; He treats us like a father whose love for His children will not let Him do anything but love them.

And Paul came along and put that into a formula, the first theology of the Church and said, "We're saved not by our righteousness, but by God's grace." That's what Christianity is all about. It proclaims that God loves us just the way we are, not for what we do. It's called "unconditional love", and I suggest that that is what characterizes the Christian home. That's the foundation of a Christian home, unconditional love. More than anything else a Christian home is where one receives unconditional love, where children are loved the way God loves them. They will know who they are because they know they've been loved.

Duke Ellington was on Mike Douglas' show one day a couple of years ago and Mike Douglas asked him about those early days...hard days...that he was sure all musicians had. Ellington said that he didn't have any of those days. Mike Douglas said, "What do you mean - you didn't starve, you didn't suffer at all?" Ellington said, "No, I started out doing exactly what I wanted to do, writing music. I had faith in myself, and it was easy". Then he added this, "When I was a little boy I was loved so much and held so much that I don't think my feet touched the ground 'till I was seven years old". I suggest to you that there is a relationship between being able to say "I had faith in myself" and testifying that "I was held until I was seven years old and loved". Because of that unconditional love, the joy he saw in other people's faces because he was here, he was in the family, he had no doubt about who he was. He knew he was loved and he knew he could be who he wanted to be.

There are all kinds of ways of raising children. Some parents are wealthy, they can give their children anything they want. But if they do not give them love, they leave them impoverished. Some parents are poor, they can't give their children hardly anything. But if they give them love, they leave them rich beyond measure. Some parents are permissive, they allow their children to move and do as they please. But if they do not give them love, that freedom is interpreted as rejection. And other parents raise their children with rules and strict discipline. But if they give their children love, they give them freedom.

To be loved unconditionally is to be given roots, it's to know who you are, to have a sense of pride in being who you are. It's the greatest gift that mothers and fathers can give their children. Unconditional love. And if you were privileged to have had a mother or have a mother who gave you that gift, that feeling, that you have reason this day to rise up and call her "Blessed".

PRAYER O God, who created us to be in families, on this day especially we give Thee thanks for the families of which we have been and are a part. We thank Thee for parents who sacrificed that we might have a better life than they knew...who loved us, guided us, cared for us, and then let us go to find ourselves, surrounding us with their prayers.

We give thanks to thee for those who have meant so much to us, lifting in particular the names of our dear mothers. In the spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen.