

"LIKE THE LOVE OF A MOTHER"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
May 12, 1996

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INTRODUCTION

One day, not too long ago, a man was boarding an airplane. As he came on board, he happened to notice that the head of the plane's cockpit flight crew was a woman. While that was no problem for him, it was nevertheless a new experience.

As he found his seat, he noticed that there were three persons sitting right in front of him. One was a young boy about nine years of age. And next to him was a man in his mid-thirties. And then next to the man was a woman probably in her mid to late fifties.

The man could not help overhearing the conversation among these three persons as the plane readied itself for departure. He realized that the three people in front of him were part of the family of the woman pilot. The boy was her son. The man was her husband. The older woman was her mother. Suddenly it came to him why the family was on the plane. This was the first time that this woman pilot had been the head of a flight crew! They were all there to honor her promotion. It was a special moment for them all!

The plane taxied down the runway and then paused for a few seconds before the takeoff. The engines began to roar and the plane gained speed quickly. And within seconds they were off the ground and in the air. As the plane began to bank to the south, the nine year old son began to applaud. People began to look in his direction as he called out,

"Way to go, Mom! Way to go!"

DEVELOPMENT

This morning we are applauding our moms. "Way to go, Mom! Way to go!" Yes, today's mom certainly deserves all the support and all the applause she can receive. Her role is not an easy one. Today's text is suggesting to us that God is like a loving mother. Jesus uses the analogy of the Good Shepherd, as we have seen in recent weeks in the sermon time, but He could be speaking of the good parent just as easily. He says,

"My sheep recognize My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish. No one shall snatch them from Me, for My Father has given them to me, and He is more powerful than anyone else...so no one can kidnap them from Me".

(John 10: 27 - 29)

On this special day when we pause to honor our mothers and to celebrate the significance of the Christian family, let's consider some of the analogies that we could draw between the love of a parent and the love of God. Three points to lift up.

LOVE OF GOD IS A PERSONAL KIND OF LOVE

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First, let me suggest that the love of God is a very personal kind

"My sheep recognize My name....and I know them!"

There's a delightful story about General Douglas MacArthur that I came across recently that seems to fit in here. MacArthur, of course, was a great military hero and was highly thought of down in Washington and highly regarded as a leader. He also had a bit of a reputation for being something of a cold fish, personally....unlike Bradley and Ike. His "PR" people came up with an idea. They would have him review a contingent of veterans and in the middle of the review they would have him suddenly recognize an enlisted man who had served under him during World War II.

This was what his "PR" advisors said to General MacArthur:

"It will be a tremendously moving and human moment. Out of hundreds of men lined up for your inspection, you will suddenly pick out a single individual....call him by name and recall past campaigns...the media and press will catch that moment....."

And MacArthur, I'm told, agreed to go along with the plan.

So they set up the inspection and chose their veteran. The lucky soldier would, of course, be unaware that he had been singled out for this honor. They went through the Army records, found out everything they could about this one particular soldier....where he had served....and figured out precisely where he would be standing when MacArthur marched through the ranks. And then to be on the safe side, they arranged for an aide to nudge MacArthur discreetly when he was directly in front of the chosen soldier.

Well, it all went off like clockwork. MacArthur saluted the veterans and the veterans saluted General MacArthur. The general began his march along the lines of soldiers. At the right moment, the aide gave MacArthur the nudge. MacArthur halted. He turned and looked at the man standing stiffly at attention in front of and in a rather booming voice was heard to say:

"Jones.....we were together on Corregidor! You are Corporal Jones....yes, I remember you well!"

They say that Corporal Jones looked shocked, startled and completely surprised. He stared at the General with a very puzzled look on his face. Finally, he blurted out somewhat quizzically,

"MacArthur? General MacArthur?"

General Douglas MacArthur got his bubble burst that day by the young Corporal Jones who failed apparently to recognize him. I guess we'd have to say that it served him right. It does remind us that we live in a lonely world and that so much that is counted as love is apt to be somewhat artificial, but God's love is not. Sometimes it may seem to us that we don't really count for very much. But there is one place where most of us still are somebody. And that, I would like to believe is at home. At home we are not simply a number. Our name is known....and is held precious.

We are a valued member of a family. We are a valued member, too, of God's larger family. But back to mothers.....

Did you happen to see the article in the papers recently about mothers who could recognize their babies just by touching the back of their hands? To me, it's amazing...mind-boggling! The study was done with mothers who had been caring for their newborn babies for only one week and then they were asked to feel the backs of the hands of three infants. And with about an 80% reliability they were able to pick out their own baby!

So it is with God. With God we are more than just a number. More than just a face in the crowd. God loves us with a very personal love. Even the very hairs of our head, we read in the Bible, are counted. He could choose us by touching the backs of our hands with a 100% reliability. The love of God is a very personal love and that is the first thing to be said from our Scripture.

LOVE OF GOD IS A GIVING KIND OF LOVE

giving kind of love. Jesus says,

And then for another thing, a second thing....the love of God is a very

"My sheep recognize My voice, and I know them and they follow Me. I give them eternal life and they shall never perish....."

God's very nature is to give. He has given us life in the first place and He sustains our lives with His gifts of sunshine and of rain and much more. And when our days are finished on this planet, He then gives us eternal life. Jesus once asked,

"Which of you....if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or, if he asks for a fish will give him a serpent? If you then....who are evil....know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask Him?"

(Matthew 7: 9 - 11)

God is a giving God.

You may have heard about the six year old boy who accompanied his mother into a doctor's crowded waiting room. Like most six year olds, as he waited there in the office for ~~this~~ turn, he began to ask her all sorts and kinds of questions. As a matter of fact, in less than half an hour he had managed to cover almost every subject known to humanity. To the wonder of all the others sitting in the room, his mother quietly and patiently answered each question carefully. He finally got around to God. As the other people listened to his relentless "how's" and "why's", it was plain to see by the expressions on their faces that they wondered...."How does she stand it....all those questions?" But when she answered her son's next question, she answered theirs, too. He asked,

"Mommy....why doesn't God ever get tired and just stop?"
"Because", she replied after a moment's thought...."God is love and love never gets tired."

And that, dear friends, is so true!

If you or I were God, we would probably tire quickly of giving, particularly when we get so little gratitude in return.

A minister was visiting an elderly couple in the parish and he took his young daughter along with him. As they visited the couple, the man gave the preacher's daughter a handful of peanuts. Expecting her to show a spirit of gratitude, the father asked his daughter,

"And now dear, what are you supposed to say?"
With eyes fixed on the man and the bowl of peanuts, she asked, "You got any more?"

Sounds like most of us. We accept God's gifts and seldom stop to say "thank you". It's more apt to be "Got any more?" Yet, God keeps on giving for that, you see, is His nature. The love of God is a very personal and a very giving kind of love.

AND HIS LOVE NEVER QUILTS

Which leads on to the last thought to touch on. God's love never quits. Jesus said it here in the 10th chapter of John's Gospel where we have been sitting for several Sundays.

"No one will snatch them from me...." And Paul came along to add, that "Nothing shall separate us from the love of God..."

And that's good news! God never quits loving. He never gives up and that's also true of the faithful parent.

Oh, there are two sides, of course, to this....you and I know it well. It's like the man who wrote to Reader's Digest recently and said:

"My mother has always treated me like her baby, no matter what my age. After turning 30, I purchased a computer and learned to use it. Thinking I'd impress her with my skill and my maturity, I sent her a well-written letter, complete with some computer graphics, borders and an elaborate typeface.

I phoned to ask her what she thought of the letter. She replied, 'Why dear....it's lovely. I have it hanging on the refrigerator for all my friends and neighbors to see when they stop by.'

Any of you know a mother like that? A mother who still sees a thirty-year old grown offspring as a child? Be honest....and let's face it, it's not all uncommon. At least we know that we're loved. The good parent never quits loving even when we don't deserve it.

CLOSING STORY

John Deckard lives in a quiet English village. He makes a living as a clerk in a textile factory. A modest and a quiet sort of man, he lives in an ordinary little house at the edge of town with his wife and six year old son, Rob. Like thousands of Englishmen, every morning John Deckard puts on his plain tweed suit, gets on his bicycle and rides off to work.

At the end of each day he rides home around five o'clock, changes into some casual clothes and then goes out and works in his garden until time for supper. Following supper his evenings were spent with pipe, book and family. He's a very ordinary man living what people would call a very ordinary life, but John Deckard has or had one claim to fame. For five consecutive years he has won the blue ribbon in the Village Garden Show with his prize rose. He's established a reputation for always having the best rose and people have come to expect it.

Behind his house was his rose garden. That hour before supper was always spent with his roses in the garden behind the house. Some have said that he had more than just "a way with flowers". Some have said he mothered them, was seen talking to them and they understood what he said.

This past year, deep in his own heart, John Decard knew that he would again win the blue ribbon for this summer his rose was truly a rose among roses. Never had he seen such perfection in a flower. This was his masterpiece and as he watched it daily, his pride and his sense of contentment just grew and grew.

Saturday came....show Day for the Garden Flower Show. Early in the day he would transplant his rose into a pot....but something happened. While he was at breakfast, the tragedy occurred. His little son...six year old, Rob, burst into the kitchen and chatting a mile a minute, he rushed up to the table and cried, "Daddy.....look.....look see what I have in my hand for you!"

And there in his grimy little hand was John Deckard's prize rose....half of its petals gone...head drooping....the father was stunned, speechless.

That afternoon, visitors to the Garden Show were astonished when they came to review John Deckard's entry. For in a flower pot he had thrust a stick and attached to it, at the top of the stick, was a picture of his little six year old son, Rob. When the judges heard what had happened, they gave John Deckard an honorary blue ribbon.

Some even said that the rose that was not a rose was the finest he had ever grown. God's love, you see, is like that and we can all be thankful! So let's hear it for the "moms who are present". They certainly deserve it. As someone once said....when God discovered that He couldn't be everywhere at once, He put mothers down and left it to them. Let's hear it, too, for God. For:

First: God is a loving parent. His love is personal.

Second: God's nature is a very giving nature.

Third: His love never quits.

PRAYER

Make us sensitive once again, O God, to Your nearness in these moments. Wrestle with us in the dim and shadowy corners of our lives where fear and anxiety, doubt and despair may be lurking. Help us to carry away from here with us the words of St. Paul who would remind us that love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things and endures all things. That love never ends....and that faith, hope and love abide, but the greatest of these is LOVE. In the spirit of Christ we pray. Amen.

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