

May 9th, 2021

Sermon: On Feeding, Mothering and Miracles

John 6: 1-14

Next month, we'll be attending the graduation of our godson Emmet from Northwestern University. I keep flashing on images of him as a baby and waiting nervously in the lobby of St. Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital in NYC waiting for him to be born. How did he get to be so grown up? Being his godmother is one of the joys of my life. And the mothering I get to do as an auntie to a bunch of nephews and a niece as well as other children in our lives. They truly round out my life with an unexpected abundance.

What's Mother's Day like for you? Most of us have stories that tug pretty hard on the heartstrings.

I have a confession to make. Mother's Day is often a hard one for me as it is for many. Don't misunderstand me. I love to celebrate my mother, sister and sisters-in-law today!

As a person who wanted children and couldn't have them though the day set aside for mothers has always been a tender one. I was 34 when I was first dx with breast cancer, and 38 when I had a recurrence. The day we were told we could try having children again after finishing treatment, was the same afternoon my oncologist felt more cancer and our dreams for children went out the window.

A couple of years after that when we were both in the clear and solidly in remission, we moved home to CT and attended an adoption seminar and our hopes were high again.

Where in the world might our child be from ? was an exciting question between us as we did our research....Given our health histories, however, we soon learned that adoption, too, was out of the question for a couple like us.

Nearly twenty years have gone by and it took a while to move past my own sense of woundedness. Over the years, good health returned and new dreams came to fruition. Among those was switching careers becoming a minister. The grief has turned with a gratitude and what John O'Donohue calls "an approach of reverence". I began to appreciate, too, the unique ways mothering has opened up in my life but also the storied complexity of relationships that forms our vast human experience-- most of us are raising children with a village. And our church is a vital one of those!

Most people are living and loving outside the box of the stereotypical family...I know plenty of same-gender parents raising fabulous kids and have witnessed single parents doing it solo--some with lots of help --and others without enough.

There are moms who will tell you they have way too much on their plates to handle the kids they already have.

And others with pained and complicated parenting relationships, There's the new mother, the motherless, the over-mothered, the under-mothered, and the ones whose mothers hurt them.

I have a colleague I admire who chooses to be a "foster mom" teenagers on weekends. Much of the world, too, is raised by resilient grandmothers and grandfathers who become parents once again to take care of the children in their family.

Today we also remember those who have buried their mothers and honor them on this day. And hold dear still others who grieve the loss of a child with a pain that remains too deep for words.

Society still makes assumptions about what a "real" family should look like. In response, Archbishop Desmond Tutu writes, "Differences are not intended to separate, to alienate. We are different precisely in order to realize our need of one another."

This year in particular, we've seen how hard it is to be a mom in these endless months of pandemic, fragility and fears for the future. And, especially those mothers who've had to choose between childcare costs and job losses. Something like a third of those women employed prior to the pandemic have had to give up their jobs in order to take care of their children.¹

Taking in this beautiful view on this Mother's Day from our front lawn, it feels right to be marking the day as important and worthy of celebration-for it is! Not just because it's the one day of the year we set aside for honoring the mothering figures in our midst and in our memories...And certainly not because our consumerist culture has us pressured to buy gifts to show our devotion, but because there is much to honor in the life-giving ways of mothering and mentoring, feeding and caring. Whether it's through relationships of nurture or of nature. Bonds of blood or of our own choosing.

As a church community, we can and do hold all of these vulnerable relationships and stories with a holy recognition that I'd call *grace*.

¹ The New York Times said on March 8, 2021 "according to the Census Bureau, a third of the working women 25 to 44 years old who are unemployed said the reason was child care demands. Only 12 percent of unemployed men cited those demands." And in an article about the pandemic's uneven costs, the NYT noted that "36 percent of Black mothers, and 30 percent of Hispanic mothers, were not working or were working less."

In the gospel of John today, grace abounds; a miracle has taken place in a crowded field of green. Jesus and his unprepared disciples are stuck needing to feed the multitudes (and best of all, there will be leftovers).

I'm struck by a few things in John's version. Jesus' opening question starts the action: *Hey, what shall we do here with these hungry mouths?* In many gospel stories, Jesus acts like a good mother, making sure the people are fed--whether on a hillside, beach or grassy plain. Nobody can listen on an empty stomach-- any mother can tell you that!

And the psalmist and prophets reminds us of a mothering God who broods over her chicks with words of comfort: Jesus says

"how often have I longed to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings" (Matt 23.37)

Likewise, in this gospel narrative the feeding of the gathered community leads to more, much more...and even a young child is noticed and becomes the catalyst for mothering the community by sharing his simple lunch. It's an intergenerational effort.

We are all needed in the feeding and mothering of one another. In the ethic of nurturing and caring for the hungry in ourselves and our neighbors. The art of the miracle is in how Jesus, with such intention, cares also for the fragments following the feast. He directs and empowers those in the community circle so that they see how abundance grows, and that even after the meal, there's the feast that remains within the fragments.

It's a mystery how everyone got fed but isn't that the way of all church potlucks--(remember those??) "Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted." As much as they wanted...that abundance for all in a world of difference and uniqueness is the vision of kingdom of GOD.

I think that's the mystery of love at work in our world, in our church. that there will be enough if we share it with a radical eye toward hospitality.

Theologian Letty Russell, in her book *Just Hospitality*, wrote about the ways of God's mathematical wisdom. Russell was a mentor of mine and I recall sitting at her dining room table as she shared her experience as an outsider --as a gay woman in the church and in the academy of male-dominated leadership. This outsider status led her to focus on articulating a theology of hospitality that emphasizes the calling of the church to witness to God's intention to mend the world --with us.

For Russell, hospitality was and is central to the purpose of the church. It is above all the work of justice-making, expressing love across those human differences that have long been sources of injustice and oppression. *A Just Hospitality* is offered always to the outsider through the practice of hospitality with justice.

Russell names the "missing persons" in our world whose situation of poverty, injustice, and suffering makes us weep. These missing persons are not strangers in the kingdom of God. Yet they need the witness of a church that practices a ministry of hospitality and justice on their behalf.²

Standing with volunteers at the busy diaper bank and food pantry last Saturday, I observed this "hospitality" in practice and heard the details of how the generosity and the need has multiplied. I also recalled a recent article from the *New Yorker* which reiterated that 1 in 6 children now live below the federal poverty line...and it's considerably higher for families of color --and many of those households are led by single moms.

² Letty M. Russell, *Just Hospitality: God's Welcome in a World of Difference* (2009) pp.18-19

Making sure that all are fed in body, soul and spirit is the work of our church, it is the work of mothering, and mentoring and spreading out the abundance equitably, fragments and all. It takes your loaves and my fish and a child's generous gift. It means being present to those on the edges--and accepting those edges and disprivileged wounds in ourselves. Writes author Anne Lamott, "its a chain of mothering that keeps the whole shebang afloat."

It's the everyday miracle of a Just hospitality, one made visible and central to the shared partnerships we form together as God's beloved community in the making.

However you are celebrating this Mothering Sunday, may you remember that we're all needed to make and partake of the feast.
And don't forget the leftovers!

Happy Mother's Day!

Rev. Laura Fitzpatrick-Nager
