

OUR MANY MOTHERS

But Na'omi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go, return each of you to her mother's house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The LORD grant that you may find a home, each of you in the house of her husband!" Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept.

Then they lifted up their voices and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. And she said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." But Ruth said, "Entreat me not to leave you or to return from following you; for where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God; where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if even death parts me from you." (Ruth 1:8-9, 14-17, RSV)

I've been a parent now for about three weeks and it's pretty much as I expected: I know diddley squat about being a parent. Thankfully, there have been plenty of people to share their own experiences of parenting with me. I'm not sure exactly when, but as the time drew close for the birth and adoption of our son, Julian, I began to get lots of unsolicited anecdotes and advice on parenting. I began to hear so many stories of "blowout" bowel movements, colicky babies, and endless nights without sleep that the friendly advice began to feel like a form of parental hazing. People I considered to be loving and caring would get an evil gleam in their eye as they told their stories in a tone of voice that seemed to say, "Just you wait. You'll see what I'm talking about." Almost as if I was pledging a worldwide fraternity/sorority of parents, I began to view the parental "horror stories" as a paddling I was required to undergo before I could enter the club. It reminded me of the scene from the movie *Animal House* where the pledges were paddled by the fraternity brothers. Projectile vomiting? "Thank you sir. May I have another?" Pee on work clothes? "Thank you sir. May I have another?" Teething? "Thank you sir. May I have another?"

I know the parental "hazing" was all good-natured ribbing, but after a while I began to wonder if parenting wasn't all it was cracked up to be. I remember talking to Colleen Only about it, and she reminded me that if parenting was really all that bad, word would get out and people would stop having children. It must be worthwhile. I kept that in mind as I listened to one story after another of baby bodily excretions.

Sure enough, once we returned with Julian, it was like we made it into the Parent Club without being blackballed. Suddenly, the stories of how great it is to be a parent began to be told. The great flow of tradition handed down from one person to another was in turn handed down to me. Jimmy Only shared with me a thought which he had in turn received from Hugh Otham: "Being a parent just keeps getting better and better." I like that idea, because things have certainly started out well. Also, my dad shared with me words that he had in turn received from a man in his church when my older sister was

born: “Children change so quickly that you want to make sure you are there for as many days as you can.” This saying has taken on new meaning for me as I’ve been amazed at the new things Julian can do each day: from lifting up his head to focusing on objects across the room.

I have received a lot of information on being a parent: advice, anecdotes (both funny and terrifying), endless articles and books, and plenty of documentaries and talk shows. Yet, I’m still aware of how little I know. Furthermore, there is one thing that no one can teach me about, not really, and that’s what it is like to be a mother. So, in many ways, I stand before you as an ill-equipped authority on motherhood. I have learned a few things about motherhood in recent days, however, and I think those things just might be worth sharing with you this morning.

One thing I’ve learned about motherhood is a new appreciation for the scripture lesson we read together this morning. It’s the story of Ruth and Naomi. Verses from this passage are often read at weddings:

*for where you go I will go,
and where you lodge I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.*

They illustrate the power of love and the commitment it takes to create a family. In the biblical context, however, these words are not shared between a bride and groom, but they are spoken by a woman to her mother-in-law.

We pick up the story of Ruth and Naomi at a crucial time. Naomi, her husband and two sons left the land of Israel and went to the land of Moab, but in time her husband and her sons died there. In the ancient world, there were few persons in society more powerless than a widow. In a culture centered on men, to be a woman alone meant being without protection, security or provision. Both of her sons had married, so we find Naomi releasing her daughters-in-law from any obligation. It would be natural to think that the Moabite women would return to their own people to be cared for just as Naomi made plans to return to her own people in Israel. One daughter-in-law, Orpah, kissed Naomi goodbye and returned home.ⁱ The other daughter-in-law, Ruth, does something astounding. Not only does she remain with her mother-in-law despite the fact that she is under no obligation to do so, but she chooses to accompany her back to Israel.

What kind of love must Ruth have had for Naomi to take such a dramatic step? It seems reasonable that a person would leave everything they knew for the sake of their mother, but their mother-in-law? Rarely does a relationship ending with the words “in-law” ever reach such a level of intimacy. I would offer that Ruth must have been loved in return by Naomi. Naomi must have become like a mother to Ruth.

In the following verses, we read that when Naomi returns to her home town in Bethlehem she fails to realize the importance of Ruth’s love for her. When the folks back home see

her and ask, “Is this Naomi?” Naomi replies, “Do not call me Naomi. Call me Mara.” Mara means “bitterness” and it indicated how empty she was left by the death of her husband and son. From her perspective, she was left with nothing, nothing that is except for Ruth.

Naomi fell into a trap that many women fall into. She defined her worth only in terms of her husband and children. No longer being of an age to reproduce and being without husband and children, Naomi saw herself as worthless. Yet, there with her was Ruth, providing the “ironic commentary” that Naomi’s view of herself was untrue.ⁱⁱ

When Jennifer and I began the adoption process, we struggled with the language of what to call ourselves. We would hear language describing the parents that conceived the child as “natural” parents or “biological” parents. Did that mean that if the child did not come from our egg and sperm he was somehow not really ours? Were we somehow not “real” parents? We gladly seized upon the terminology common to adoption literature that describes the parents who conceive the child as “birthparents” and the parents who adopt the child as “adoptive parents.” All are parents in one sense or another, just different kinds of parents.

Each of us can think of examples where the people who are legally considered the parents of children because of their shared DNA remain parents in name only. The shocking cases of child abuse that occur daily in our newspapers reveal that just because you gave birth to a child does not mean that you are a parent of that child in any moral or spiritual sense. Thank God that being a parent is more than just biology, otherwise the many people who never knew their birthmothers or worse knew their birthmothers and were abused by them would never know what it is to experience the motherly love that a woman has to offer. In the same way, mothers who have been abandoned by their children still have the opportunity to feel love by people who have “adopted” them as parents.

I learned about motherly love taking different forms over the past few weeks. Since I first knew Jennifer I always sensed that she would be a wonderful mother. She told me early on in our relationship that childhood health problems had left her unable to give birth to children. We have always known we would adopt and were thankfully spared the rollercoaster ride of fertility treatments that so many couples have to go through. So, I always knew that although our children would not come from her womb, they would be loved just as deeply by her. It has been my joy to experience her as a mother to my son over the past few weeks. I came home from work on Friday and found her napping on the couch with Julian asleep on her chest. Neither one stirred as I entered the room, and when I saw them I froze. I looked for a camera, but not finding one, I tried to capture that snapshot in my mind. I wished that I could stop time and live in that moment for a long time and simply watch the beauty of my wife and my son together.

I have also learned in recent weeks about the love of a mother through the actions of Julian’s birthmother, Cindie. Jennifer and I chose to pursue an open adoption, meaning that we would know the birthmother of our child and would maintain a relationship with her. Rather than it being a secret and everyone pretending like the adoption never

happened, we chose to be open about it from the beginning. It seems weird if you have never considered it before. I certainly was uncertain about it upon first hearing about the concept. We came to believe, however, that an open adoption was better for everyone involved. Julian would grow up knowing he was adopted and that he has adoptive parents and a birthmother. He will never wonder where he comes from or who he looks like. There will never be a time when the deep dark secret of his adoption has to be revealed. It provides peace for Cindie so that she doesn't have to wonder what happened to the child she gave birth to or did she do the right thing? Knowing her relieves our fears of wondering if and when a mysterious birthmother would show up wanting a reunion with him. Overall, it just seemed right to treat Julian's adoption as what it is, an act of love by everyone involved.

When we first talked with Cindie on the phone, we instantly felt a connection with her. She is a strong-willed and loving person who desired to deal courageously with an unplanned pregnancy. Now in her late thirties, Cindie was a teenager mother who raised three children essentially on her own. Currently Cindie is working to help her kids afford college and try for successful lives. She felt a strong responsibility for the children she already had and wanted a better life not only for them for the child yet to be born.

Cindie picked us out of the many families working with our agency, but we also picked her. She taught me about a mother's love as she dealt with the grief of giving birth to a child and then placing that child into the care of another family. She has endured the constant reaction to her choice by friends, family and strangers alike, "I could never give up my child." The unspoken accusation is that Cindie is some kind of monster for sending off her own child. Cindie has had to trust her own sense of what is right and to remember that she did not "give up" Julian, but instead she has given all of her children a better life. Her love for Julian was evident in the many tears she cried as we said our goodbyes.

On the one hand, Jennifer did not give birth to Julian, but she loves him as a mother. On the other hand, Cindie will not raise Julian, but she loves him as a mother. I would offer that our definitions of what a mother is and is not ought to be expanded. Perhaps we should apply the terminology of "birthparents" and "adoptive parents" to all kinds of relationships. We raise each other's children. Our love for our own children must prompt us to care for all of the children in our lives. Although we may honor the sacred relationship between birthparents and their children, we cannot afford to fall into the trap of believing that a biological connection alone determines what children we will care for or that the ability or inability to bear children biologically determines the amount of love a woman has to offer. "Adoptions" take place all the time wherever adults love the children around them.

I love my mother and remain close with her. In addition, I have been blessed to have many women throughout my life who have loved me like a son or grandson. They took time out for me. They listened to my hopes, fears and doubts. They cheered me on when I succeeded and comforted me when I failed. I have known a mother's love not only through my own mother but through hundreds of women who have cared for me. More

often than not, I experienced this love from women who were a part of the churches where I attended. We are created in the image of God, and I believe the motherliness of God lies within each of us. In the Church, the power of Christ can energize that latent quality and bring it to its ultimate fulfillment in active passionate love.

One of my favorite authors is Anne Lamott. In her writings, she describes her conversion to Christianity as an adult. One of my favorite stories by her comes in her book, *Traveling Mercies*. She has a chapter entitled, “Why I Make Sam Go to Church.” In it, she describes the small urban church in San Francisco she attends with her son, Sam. Despite the fact that Sam would rather be anywhere else on Sundays, she takes him to church, because there she experienced love and acceptance.

Lamott tells of when she told her church that she was pregnant and a soon-to-be single mom, she received not condemnation or self-righteous pity but love and excitement over her coming child. She writes,

When I announced during worship that I was pregnant, people cheered. All these old people, raised in Bible-thumping homes in the Deep South, clapped for this soon-to-be single mom...Then almost immediately they began to see me as the incubator who was going to bring them a new baby to have and to hold...I first brought Sam to church when he was five days old. My friends very politely pretended to care how I was doing but were mostly killing time until it was their turn to hold Sam again. They called him “our baby” or sometimes “my baby.” “Bring me my baby!” they’d insist. “Bring me that baby now!” “Hey, you’re hogging that baby.” I believe that they came to see me as Sam’s driver hired to bring him back to them every Sunday.ⁱⁱⁱ

The church wrapped its arms around this struggling mother and newborn child. In addition the older women of the church, many of whom were on government assistance, would surreptitiously slip Anne money while giving her a warm hug.

One such woman in her church, Mary Williams, has a special love for Anne and Sam. Mary is in her eighties and sits in the back row at church. She is a single mother who raised five children, one of whom died young. She knew that Anne was on her own and struggling, so she would give Anne a hug and stick a plastic bag full of dimes into Anne’s pocket. Over time, Anne became a successful writer and has no more need of the bags of dimes, but the little baggies keep coming. Lamott writes,

Mary doesn’t know that professionally I’m doing much better now, she doesn’t know that I no longer really need people to slip me money. But what’s so dazzling to me, what’s so painful and poignant, is that she doesn’t bother with what I think she knows or doesn’t know about my financial life. She just knows we need another bag of dimes, and that is why I make Sam go to church.^{iv}

Happy Mother's Day!

Rev. Chase Peebles
Mother's Day, May 11, 2003
The Fourth Sunday of Easter
The Congregational Church of Manhasset (UCC), New York

PASTORAL PRAYER

God, you are both a mother and a father to us. You give us life and fill us with wisdom. You have provided for us women to care for us and raise us. Help us to honor their efforts by caring for all children in all places. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ, AMEN.

ⁱ A little bit of trivia here folks. The character Orpah is who Oprah Winfrey is named after. The name was misspelled on her birth certificate. File that factoid away and pull it out at your next cocktail party. You'll impress people. See Marcia Nelson's article "Oprah on a Mission: Dispensing a Gospel of Health and Happiness" in the September 25-October 8 2002 issue of *The Christian Century*.

ⁱⁱ I am grateful to the writing of Amy-Jill Levine for this insight. Amy-Jill Levine, "Ruth" in *The Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992): 80.

ⁱⁱⁱ Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Pantheon, 1999): 101-102.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, 105.