

Easter 4
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

May 11, 2014
Rev. Paul Moore

Holy Mothering

Today we celebrate the ideal of motherhood. My mother used to tell our girlfriends that they needed to remember that the most formative years of our lives were spent in the arms of another woman! A mother is the only person who can love each of her children equally, and yet each child gets all her love. A mother's love can also be fierce. Agatha Christie said this about a mother's love:

“A mother's love for her child is like nothing else in the world. It knows no law, no pity. It dares all things and crushes down remorselessly all that stands in its path.”

I remember when our oldest son, Leni, was in a terrible car wreck. Karisse's desperation to get to her son was all-consuming. That's because our ideal for a mother's love is like God's love for us. It is unconditional, and it is without limit.

This morning the lessons speak to us about shepherds. We know from Christmas that shepherds were not necessarily considered to be of the best kind of people. But Jesus' teaching here makes a distinction between those who had no real interest in the good of the sheep, and those who do. A hireling's interest in the sheep is self-centered. The contract is clear: take care of the sheep—get paid. Do the minimum to get by because all you really want is the paycheck at the end of the day. Their love of sheep is conditioned by the paycheck. But Jesus is not the hireling. He owns the sheep. The sheep belong to him. He knows each one by name. They trust him, and he cares for them.

As an image of Jesus' love for us it reminds us that, like the ideal we have for a mother's love, so Jesus' love for us is without condition or limit. And the sheep respond in kind. They know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will follow him. They trust the unconditional and limitless love of the Shepherd.

The Pharisees don't get it, so Jesus changes the image a bit. He is the Shepherd, but he is also the gate for the sheep. Those who know his voice follow him. They go out and they come in, they find good pasture and protection from the dangers of life. Everyone else is a bandit and a thief. That's harsh words for the people you're talking to, Jesus, but when you love unconditionally, that's what selfish love feels like. It's a thief, for it robs what Jesus came to give—life abundant.

In summary, Jesus' unconditional love is life-giving, so much so that Jesus calls it life

abundant. Selfishness by contrast, robs and steals.

We say that God is the Father of us all, and that is right. If God is our father, who is our mother? Traditionally we say that the Church is our mother. Let me draw some parallels for you.

Mother and father love one another: God and the Church love one another.

Mothers nurture and guide us: The Church nurtures and guides us.

Mothers protect and support us: The Church protects and supports us.

Mothers give birth to us: The Church gives birth to God's children in baptism.

If that is so there are two things we need to think about on this Mother's day.

The first is a word to us collectively—the Church. We, as the Church, must love as we are loved. We must show our own children and the neighborhood children around us, and accurate picture of the love of the Father as best we know how. There is no reason not to be fierce about it, too. Nurturing is serious business. Nobody should mess with that or they will have us to answer for it! We should stand fiercely against anything that belittles, defaces, damages or destroys the children.

The second is a word to the children of the Church—us as individuals. Through the Church the Good Shepherd calls us each by name. We must learn to answer that call, to trust that voice and to follow it explicitly.

Sometimes, like our earthly mothers, the love of the church is sometimes less than a reflection of how it has been loved. Even so, just as we would stand up to defend our mothers, flawed though they are, we should also stand up and protect the Church. The world is full of misinformation about the Church and the God we serve. We are often seen as a place of rules and guilt, of self-serving shepherds, of lip-service to love without the action of it, of provincialism and politics, in short, of selling out on the love we say we have known. This is a lie. We need to let the world know that we are about the mothering, unconditional, eternal and limitless love of God, nothing more and nothing less.

And one more thing: Just as children of a given mother are different from one another, yet they compose one family, we, too, are different from one another. We come from different cultural backgrounds, we come from different socio-economic standings, we come from large and small families and from different races. We are of different ages and genders. And yet, we have this in common: We are children of the Father and children of the Church, the Bride of Christ. We are one family with one set of parents.

In the family we find our differences to be enriching, not dividing, they add, they do not subtract from who we are. They give us a fitting example of the unconditional and infinite love of God.

Sometimes it costs us to live with our differences. In a family a mother gathers her children around her, different though they are, and in her presence those differences do not divide but broaden and enrich family life. In the same way, in the Church we strive to respect our differences, learn to appreciate them, and let them enrich our lives together.

Sometimes it costs us to live as a family in a world of torn families. The work of showing the world what unconditional love is like is hard sometimes. But we do it, because life in this family is life-giving, not death dealing, it's important to be how we are, and to offer the world an alternative to its divisive, selfish and destructive ways.

Mothers: Icons of God's unconditional love to which our response is complete. They would love nothing more than to know that their love points the way to the Source and inspiration of all unconditional love, and that we share it in the world.