

God's Maternal Love
John 15:1-8
Preached by Rev Dr. Harry Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Sunday, May 10, 2009

Since it's Mother's Day, let's celebrate motherhood at its best! The ideal mother pours herself into her children. She never plays favorites, always stands ready to protect and nurture, knows when to say "yes" and how to say "no," never uses her children for selfish purposes, loves unconditionally even when disappointed and angry and would willingly make the supreme sacrifice to save her children.

We often address God as Father and Christ as brother, but let's acknowledge God's love is obviously maternal. God also pours himself into his children, never plays favorites, always stands ready to protect and nurture, knows when to say "yes" and how to say "no," never uses his children for his own selfish ends, loves unconditionally even when disappointed and angry, and willingly made the supreme sacrifice to save his children.

It's a helpful coincidence the gospel lesson for this fifth Sunday in Easter has Jesus inviting us to be friends with God so we can be as intimately connected to him as children are to their mothers.

Jesus' metaphor of the shepherd and his sheep helped us understand our relationship with God. Today Jesus' new metaphor shows us he's the vine and we're the branches and makes it clear, just as sheep need the shepherd, branches need the vine.

Last Sunday I guessed no one in the room had any real knowledge of shepherding. Probably not too many of us have any experience with vineyards either but a lot of us do have gardens and know something about vines, branches and the care of both.

"I am the vine, you are the branches..." Another way of putting it, "I am the tree trunk and you are the branches..." Jesus likens himself to the trunk and identifies us as his branches. The one who planted the vine and takes care of it is God the Father.

The vine dresser's (or farmer's) job is to plant and cultivate the tree. The vine's role is to bring life and energy to the branches. The branches' job is to produce fruit.

If the branch bears fruit, well and good. But if the branch withers, the vine dresser comes along and cuts it off to divert the life-giving nutrients to those branches that are bearing fruit so they can produce even more.

Anyone who does yard work knows what I'm talking about. Especially in spring time you're on the lookout for dead branches. So, to save the tree the bad branches are pruned, gathered up and burned.

Now, before we move on let's address the important question: "Does God see me as one of those non fruit bearing branches that are cut off and burned?"

That's our unspoken fear, isn't it? Like the disciples at the Last Supper asking, "Is it I Lord?" after Jesus revealed one of them would betray him, we're all wondering, "Will I be the one cut off and burned up?" Why do we think that? Let's be honest. We'd all have to admit we're not the disciples we could be and don't produce the fruit we should be. Because the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak, we always expect God to answer our prayers, but we don't always expect to answer God's call to do something significant for him because we're too busy, timid or self-absorbed.

Now, I'm not saying these things about you are true or not. Only you know because only you (with the Spirit's guidance) can discern whether or not you're really giving your all to Christ and his kingdom. If you're being too hard on yourself and God is totally satisfied with your level of discipleship, I hope and pray God will quickly replace your guilt with affirmation. However, if you're slacking, I equally hope and pray the Spirit will convict you so you'll be freed up to bear the fruit you're capable of producing.

Having said that, let's consider this: the pruning Jesus talks about doesn't necessarily mean you're about to be cut off from God.

Listen again to Jesus' explanation: "He removes every branch that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit, he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you." (John 15:2-3)

What does this mean? You're not being pruned for destruction, you're being pruned for growth.

Even though it sounds like God is ready to cut you off and burn you up because you're not "good enough," that misinterpretation contradicts the grace and forgiveness Jesus' crucifixion made possible. Read the gospels, Jesus didn't come to condemn but to mend and restore our broken branches and gather them into his kingdom. Think of the maternal love God has for his lost children beautifully expressed in Jesus' lament, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills its prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings and you were not willing." (Luke 13:34)

Consider the implications of this saying: God sent Jesus to gather up his rebellious children, but they weren't interested. So did God destroy them? No. Instead he allowed himself to be destroyed because only the one who is hurt can forgive. That's not condemnation, that's reconciliation.

Still, let's not underestimate the seriousness of Jesus' warning. God continues to prune dead branches, and throws them into the fire. But remember what Jesus promised. "I am the Resurrection and the Life, if you believe in me though you were dead yet shall you live. If you believe in me you will not perish, but have eternal life." (John

The promise of Easter is the full, abundant life GIVEN TO US, NOT EARNED BY US. Yes, God expects you to produce fruit. You're expected to both be and make the difference in the world, and the parable of the Last Judgment in Matthew's Gospel makes crystal clear that taking care of "the least of these" is the fruit God is looking for. But in the last analysis we're saved not by what we do for God but by what God has already done for us.

There's one essential word repeated seven times in this passage that gives us still another insight into the mind of Christ: abide. I looked abide up in the dictionary: 1) to remain in place; 2) to continue to be firm; endure; 3) to dwell or sojourn.

Again, John's Gospel makes it clear, salvation is an unmerited gift. We have life only because God loves us. That's what gives us the grace to abide or live in Christ. If you abide in Christ, it's not by your own steam. God invites, then empowers you to be in that mystical friendship between you and his son. It happens not because you will it, but because God wills it. Now think about what I just said. You can only abide or live in Christ because God wills it. Why in heaven's name would God will it? Because God loves you more than you could ever imagine. "God so loved the world." (John 3:16)

So, what should you be taking from this scripture? First, when God comes after you with his shears, don't panic, because his love provokes him to prune from you anything that keeps you from him. God doesn't want to destroy you God wants you to live! And remember, God, not you, makes this possible. Even your free will response to Christ's love, is by his grace. Why? Because God is love.

As I said at the beginning, God pours himself into his children, never plays favorites, always stands ready to protect and nurture, knows when to say "yes" and how to say "no," never uses his children for his own selfish ends, loves unconditionally even when disappointed and angry, and willingly made the supreme sacrifice to save his children.

Jesus said, "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love...I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete." (John 15:10)

Today as we acknowledge and bless our mothers, don't forget to bless and acknowledge our God who makes love possible and our joy complete through Jesus Christ our Lord.