

Motherly Love

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In Hebrew (as well as in Aramaic), the word usually translated as "compassion" is the plural of a noun that in its singular form means "womb." In the Hebrew Bible, compassion is both a feeling and a way of being that flows out of that feeling.

In terms of feeling, compassion means "to feel with," ...feeling the feelings of somebody else in a visceral way, at a level somewhere below the level of the head; most commonly compassion is associated with feeling the suffering of somebody else and being moved by that suffering to do something...

And so Jesus' statement "Be compassionate as God is compassionate" is rooted in the Jewish tradition. As an image for the central quality of God, it is striking.

...to "be compassionate as God is compassionate" is to be like a womb as God is like a womb. It is to feel as God feels and to act as God acts: in a life-giving and nourishing way.

—Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*

Ancient Witness: Matthew 12:46-50

I had a friend who was a newspaper columnist in Cincinnati. Camilla was a truly progressive voice in the city. I would later become her pastor and saw her struggle and eventually die from breast cancer. She wrote once about her painful experience of having two miscarriages that I will read to you:

By Mother's Day I felt empty and wounded. I hated seeing the distended form of pregnant women as they proudly pushed their grocery carts. I could not sympathize with expectant friends when they complained of indigestion or insomnia, swollen ankles or rising blood pressure. I silently screamed at them: Oh, let me have your afflictions! If only I could grow a child!

Our culture does this to women. Maybe every culture has. But I'm convinced that we put an unfair premium on motherhood. We sugarcoat and sanctify it. Ask any woman who has tried and not succeeded. Ask married couples who choose not to parent. Ask any single woman. Ask a gay man.

Have they not felt, more than once, like outsiders? Like something less than blue chip stock? Perhaps even like morally inferior beings? I did. (Camilla Warrick, 1994)

You know, we sometimes speak of children as “agents of grace,” and rightly so. They seem to bring something extra with them, and at times they draw something extra out of others. But having a baby doesn't necessarily make a woman an agent of grace or loving. Nor does it elevate her in creation's scheme. No, if one becomes motherly, it is through one's choices and actions—how one nurtures.

Mothering, in its most profound sense, is an exercise of the heart, an exciting, humbling, lifelong adventure offered to each of us—male or female, regardless of marital status or age or sexual orientation.

In our ancient witness today from the 12th chapter of Matthew, it describes Jesus' exploits on the Sabbath—how his disciples broke the law, when they walked through a field, plucked grain and ate it; how he broke the law by healing the sick; how he got under the skin of the Pharisees when people called him the “son of David,” implying that he was a liberator; and how he further annoyed them by advocating a radical forgiveness.

It was a very long day, yet in strong, broad strokes, Jesus explained his understanding of the nature of God. Finally we learn that his mother and brothers are waiting to speak to him. Perhaps Jesus was over-stressed, who knows, when he snapped back, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” Or perhaps he dared to assail the belief that our biological ties supersede other relationships. “Stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of Abba, God, in heaven is my brother and sister and mother!’”

And so the primary relationship is not biological, Jesus seems to say, but between an individual and God. They—we—become linked, like brother and sister, mother, father and child, *by how we reflect this Divine Presence*, by how freely the Holy Mystery flows through us. In another Jesus story, someone cries out from the crowd, “Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you.” And Jesus responded, “Blessed, rather, are those who hear the word of God and follow it!” (Luke 11:27f.)

Now, this sounds jarring, even kind of rude. But the great spiritual master, Jesus, wasn't anti-mother or anti-Mother's Day. Rather, he wanted to draw attention *beyond this*—to the Divine Mother and to those who reflect this Reality to others.

Clyde Edgerton, a singer and writer from Apex, North Carolina, tells the story of Mattie Rigsbee in his novel, *Walking Across Egypt*. She's an unpretentious, old, sick widow, the kind of person some of us might dismiss as a hick. She lives alone in a modest home in the South. Two things you have to know about Mattie: She loved to feed people on her home cooking, and she loved her church, where she's been in charge of the Lottie Moon Missionary Society for five years. Mattie's narrow life gets interesting when she takes in a grungy, thieving juvenile delinquent and cooks for him, cleans him up and gives him a chance. To the horror of her own grown kids and her church, she even lets this orphaned n'er-do-well think that she is his grandmother.

Well, after prayer and consultation with the pastor, the head deacon decides he must tell Mattie that she has gone too far. In his mind he builds his argument:

You cannot take in, support, hide, and conspire with a known criminal. You can treat him well in prison, the Scriptures even speak of that, but anything beyond that is wrong; beyond that is where the Devil comes in. It's clear.

But Mattie has been snagged by a piece of the Gospel: “Whatever you do unto the least of these, you do unto God.” It fills her head with a new logic; it fills her heart with love; it activates her dull life. Her kids, who haven't paid much attention to her, are unhappy when she wants to become the delinquent's legal guardian. But Mattie is going further. She is imagining new, familial relationships that are entirely *beyond biology*.

And so, when we have a day called Mother's Day, I hope that we are celebrating more than housekeeping, although it is certainly important to show appreciation for this. In a card store I saw one that said, "Mom, for years you cooked for me, did my laundry and cleaned up after me. What I can't understand... Why did I ever move out?" For many years now, people have known that these duties are not gender-specific. A man is just as genetically equipped to do them as a woman, of course. And I hope that we are celebrating more than the biological ability of women to procreate, although it is certainly good to celebrate that. Rather, I hope that we are celebrating the caring and nurturing of mothers, something which points to God.

New Testament scholar, Marcus Borg, pointed out that the command of Jesus to "be compassionate as God is compassionate" (Luke 6:6), the word compassion literally means "to feel with" or "to suffer with." So this is a call to feel the suffering of others. In Hebrew, the word usually translated as "compassion" is the plural of a noun that in its singular form means "womb." The womb is an image for the central quality of God! And so Jesus' statement "Be compassionate as God is compassionate" means to be like a womb as God is like a womb. It is to feel as God feels and to act as God acts: in a life-giving and nourishing way. But the church has portrayed God exclusively as male, powerful, and often even violent. And it has neglected this image of God.

Adrienne Rich, that marvelous author, once wrote:

Because young humans remain dependent upon nurture for a much longer period than other mammals, and because of the division of labor long established in human groups, where women not only bear and suckle but are assigned almost total responsibility for children, most of us first know both love and disappointment, power and tenderness, in the person of a woman.

Because of this, "mother" is a powerful metaphor for God. The phrase, "a face only a mother could love," points to the unconditional dedication of God toward humanity. Sometimes humanity has a face that only a Mother God can love. Elizabeth Johnson, in her classic book, *She Who Is*, wrote,

The compassion of God the Mother insures that she loves the weak and dispossessed as well as the strong and beautiful. We do not have to be wonderful according to external norms to elicit her love, for this is freely given by virtue of the maternal relationship itself. God looks upon all with a mother's love that makes the beloved beautiful. Human persons cannot earn or merit this love, but it is freely and abundantly given.

This is the nature of Divine Presence—an unconditional, unmerited love. This loving, nurturing Presence is not earned in any way! And to become more aware of this life giving Presence, we don't focus upon our own goodness or achievements. These, in fact, can actually obscure this entirely gratuitous, unconditional, cosmic Motherly Love, which is the very ground of our being.

The great spiritual quest, it seems to me, is to see that we are living and moving in God—in this womb of love—that is working to prepare us for a rebirth, to be compassionate and to establish justice.

I came upon an article on the National Public Radio website ("How Not to Raise a Narcissist") that was about a new study about parental styles. The study concluded that children who were told that

they were more special than other children or superior were more likely to develop narcissistic traits over time—an over-inflated sense of self, entitlement, lack of empathy and overvaluing their abilities and skills. Well-meaning mothers and fathers who over-praise and emphasize a child’s specialness can actually be doing harm. Instead, the study found that what actually leads to a healthy self-esteem is *parental warmth*.

Professor and author, Jean Twenge, (*The Narcissism Epidemic* and *Generation Me*) comments that people have *confused overvaluing specialness with love*. She suggests, “Instead of saying, ‘You’re special,’ say ‘I love you.’”

And this, it seems to me, is the style of the Divine Mother,
who heals us not with praise but with love.
This love, this Compassionate Presence, comes to us freely
and is *not dependent upon anything we do*,
embracing us and making us whole.
As Carl Jung said, “I would rather be whole than good.”

This is an important spiritual insight to learn and relearn.
This is a Reality for us to experience not just once, but over and over and over,
becoming a source of deep, unshakable peace—
that we might open ourselves to the Divine Mother,
no matter what we’ve done or not done,
whether we’ve been special or decidedly ordinary,
and hear Her whisper to our hearts,
“I love you. I love you. I love you.”

(NOTE: The spoken sermon, also available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)