

“Meeting Mom again for the First Time”

May 13, 2007

Yesterday was quite a day for me. It was the culmination of four and a half years of life education. Oh yes, I did receive a Master of Divinity, but the seminary doesn't award a degree for the real education I've received. The seminary taught me how to think theologically, how to properly exegete a Bible passage—that kind of stuff...the science of ministry if you will. However, the art of ministry...the *art* of ministry I have learned here with you, my immediate family, and my Oak Hill family. You all have supported, and often endured me as I have transformed from a teacher to a pastor. I say endured...As I look back at the last four and a half years here, sometimes I just have to shake my head. It is very much like early years in teaching. I really used to feel sorry for the kids I had my first couple of years...I mean, those poor kids—As I learned my craft of teaching, there were some days I was just plain awful. But now, like then, I grew and transformed. I became then, and have become now a different person. You have given me the grace and space to fail forward...to stumble and bumble, stutter and sputter to laugh...and...to cry. You have nurtured me along this journey...and I suppose fitting for today...you all have nurtured me much like a mother would nurture a child.

Well, today is Mother's Day. I have to tell you Mother's Day is a really tough Sunday to preach. While many of us find today to be a celebration, others find no occasion for joy on Mother's Day. Perhaps the loss of a mother makes today a bittersweet occasion. Many still have never enjoyed a good relationship with their mother. I'd like to take just a moment to ask God's presence to be felt in all of these situations...If today is cause for celebration, celebrate. If today is a time where you need healing and forgiveness, let God do that work. Let's pray silently together—AMEN.

I wonder, how many of you can remember the first time you realized your mothers were human beings. What I mean is that most of us as young kids look at our mothers as these perfect beings who have superhuman capabilities. We come to expect our mothers to be able to do anything. We come to see our mother's as sort of...Superwoman jumping tall buildings and the like. Of course all relationships and situations are different, but there seems to be a fairly natural progression with children and mothers. From 0 to grade school, Mom *is* this Super Woman. In the Middle School years something has started to happen to Mom, she's slipping somehow, but we can't quite put our finger on it. By high school, the

cape has come off and Mom, well, Mom...what happened?

This was my personal experience with my Mom. When I was 12 years old, we went to Montreal, Canada for the summer Olympics. I was right there on the fence between Mom being Supermom, and something was starting to happen. BUT, both my sisters were in high school. They actually began to make fun of mom. The way she walked through the subway...it was this goofy walk and stare...kind of confused, and they actually made fun of her right to her face. You have to imagine my confusion...no, no, this is Supermom! However, when we went to the water polo game and Mom wanted to know how the horses could breath under water...at that point...well, that's when I began to have my doubts too.

Over the years I've come to understand and relate to my mom in many different ways, but ultimately, no matter what...she's still Mom to me, and I mean Mom in that she's not a real person Mom...do you now what I mean? She's you know...Mom. However, I think I met my mom, the person, the real, flesh and blood fallible and vulnerable Joyce Griffith Abell on Mother's Day a year ago today. As many of you know my dad died this past August. Prior to that, the entire family had gone out to visit Mom and Dad for Mother's Day. All of us immediately noticed a significant deterioration in Dad's health. Moreover, what we noticed was a significant deterioration in Mom. No matter what the circumstances, not matter how bad things had been, Mom always, always has been so positive and upbeat. This time though, the spark was gone. She had become Dad's fulltime caretaker...and from my point of view, it was literally taking the life out of *her*.

My brother and sisters and I called an emergency lunch meeting do discuss what was going on. We all agreed something had to be done—someone had to confront Mom with this issue. We decided that it would be best and least threatening coming from just one of us. We went through the strengths and weaknesses of each one of us as to who should talk to Mom. It was eventually decided that *I*...the youngest, the jokester would do it. We decided that Mom might hear it best coming from me because it would have more impact coming from a guy who is always clowning around...but now, deadly serious.

So, we ended up going to Border's bookstore and sat for a conversation. I have to say this was probably the most difficult conversation I've had with anyone...ever. But the blessing of that conversation was that Mom laid aside the role of Mom...Superwoman, whatever, and we connected as two adults giving and receiving tough, but unconditional love. In that moment my mom

revealed to me who she really was...what she was all about.

...Somehow, I guess it's just the goofy way my brain works, but as I was thinking of this conversation with my mom, I began thinking of the parallels to how many of us struggle to understand God. Now, before you think I'm placing moms on *that* high of a pedestal...bear with me.

When I found the Bible passage we are using today, it really resonated with me for some reason. I've truly wrestled with it and processed it over and over. You know at first glance it seemingly doesn't have a whole lot to do with mothers, Mother's Day, or relationships. The passage is from Philippians, Chapter 2, Verses 5-8 (The Message) Let me read it to you...

"Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. He had equal status with God but didn't think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became human! Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn't claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death—and the worst kind of death at that—a crucifixion."

There is a whole lot of theology packed in this one brief passage. Depending on what scholar you consult and how you interpret the passage, it brings up the notion of a Jesus who has always existed, that is to say, a Jesus who is an eternal being...equal with God. Moreover, this notion points to a divine understanding of Jesus. However, in the second half of the passage we can't ignore what it also says about Jesus...it says, he became human and stayed human. This of course is subject to interpretation as well, but we do have to contend with the ramifications of a human Jesus. But what is this passage really telling us? I believe it is telling us a little more about how we might understand God, and maybe how we can understand the relationships with our Mothers or any significant relationship for that matter.

You see, often times I think a lot of us struggle to relate to God...who is God, what is God? What is God like? Is...God? I believe this Bible passage gives us a glimpse of what God is like. Jesus is a revelation of God in human form that we can more easily understand. I believe that through Jesus, we get a picture of what God might be like. Jesus' ministry was very earthly. He conducted his ministry in the trenches—with the people. It was, as the Bible passage said, *"an incredibly humbling process. He didn't claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a*

selfless, obedient life." But because of this, he became real to them and showed them through his ministry what God might be like...God is love...unconditional love. Because of the human Jesus, we get a good idea what God might be all about.

And what about our Mothers? Is there not a metaphor hidden in this Bible passage to help us deepen our relationships with our mothers...our friends...our companions? Often we are prevented from deep, authentic, loving relationships because we have failed to recognize or embrace the very real human frailties that exist in everyone...and often ourselves. This may sound pretty lofty...but what if we *did* think of ourselves like the way Christ Jesus thought of himself? This is not power trip, far from it. It is a truly humbling process.

This means we are letting go of our oftentimes-unrealistic expectations for one another. Expectations based on what we need or expect someone to be, not on what God has created and intended that someone to be. When we place selfless, unconditional love at the center of all of our relationships, here too I believe we begin to get a good idea of what God might be all about.

CLOSING: I found the following quote from Meryl Streep which I think sums things up pretty well, she said, *"Motherhood has a very humanizing effect. Everything gets reduced to essentials."*

My prayer on this Mother's Day is that we focus today on the essentials in our relationships—accepting, forgiving and loving unconditionally.

Have a great Sunday, go in peace.