

"Somebody to Love,"

8 May 2005

(Mother's Day)

Bible passage: **Isaiah 66:12-14** (TEV)

"You will be like a child that is nursed by its mother, carried in her arms, and treated with love. I will comfort you in Jerusalem, as a mother comforts her child. When you see this happen, you will be glad; it will make you strong and healthy."

Happy Mother's Day! I wasn't at Worship Team when today's service was put together, and I didn't realize how touching it was going to be.

Yesterday, Jerry Toomer of our Oak Hill band sent me an email with some of the things we owe our mothers for. While they may not quite be in keeping with the rest of the tone, I'm going to use a few of them anyway, because they're too good not to.

The things we owe our mothers for:

My mother taught me religion.

"You'd better pray that comes out of the carpet!"

My mother taught me logic.

"Because I said so, that's why."

My mother taught me irony.

"Stop crying, or I'll give you something to cry about!"

My mother taught me genetics.

"You are just like your father!"

My mother taught me justice.

"When you have kids, I hope they grow up to be just like you!"

Today is Mother's Day, and it's one of those days that we are quite careful about that here at The Garden.

Certainly, we want to show extra appreciation for those we call our mothers, but it's a day that, in my view, also needs to strike a delicate balance. For sure, we know that many here this morning are mothers, but some have experienced the death of their mother, and so this may be a bittersweet day for them. There are those, unfortunately, who have not had the best of experiences with their mother, and it's important to acknowledge that as well.

From my own experience, I know that there are probably some here who long to become parents, but who have found that difficult or impossible, and there are still others who for whatever reason, will never experience what it's like to be the mother.

Having said all that, I think it's important to note some of us may relate to someone who's become sort of a surrogate mother to us, and still others of us may be that substitute mother for another person. So, even though we may not fit the legal definition of a mother, many of us may in fact be living that role in our lives in other ways.

Many times, the reason we yearn for that kind of relationship is because we really want somebody to love, to help us experience a life that is filled with the kinds of loving relationships that make it all worthwhile. I suspect that's a universal desire—to have someone to love who will also love us in the course of our lives.

Yet, I think it's important that we be honest and realistic about having somebody to love. It's one thing to love out of a genuine desire to nurture someone, to help them grow and mature, to share a part of life with them, but it's quite another to feel that we have to have somebody to love because we can't be a complete whole person without a child in our lives. I've always believed that if we aren't happy, whole persons without a child, we won't be happy, whole people with a child in our lives. In other words, it's important that we have the right motivation for having someone to love in our lives.

Well, I want us to think today about how we can love somebody, be it our mothers, our children, our life partners or our friends. What's the nature of the love we're talking about today? We will put all this in the context of a mother's love for a child, but I really think it fits with any kind of loving relationship.

Maybe the Bible passage for this morning is a good starting point. This is found in the writing of a prophet known as Isaiah, and throughout the book of Isaiah, the prophet is talking to the people of Israel, trying to provide images of the life that they might lead. The writer often uses analogies to help the listener understand,

and that's what's happening in this passage. It's important to realize that this passage isn't technically about parenting, but rather about providing hope to the people of Israel about the possibility of their lives in the future.

The version of the passage as we have it is this: "You will be like a child that is nursed by its mother, carried in her arms, and treated with love. I will comfort you in Jerusalem, as a mother comforts her child. When you see this happen, you will be glad; it will make you strong and healthy."

The passage is directed toward Israel, and there's the promise that God is like a mother who cares for her children and comforts them. Although this is specifically addressed to Israel, I think there's some good stuff here that we can also apply to the kind of relationship we're talking about today. It highlights some of the essentials of a good, loving relationship. As Elaine Heffner, a psychotherapist and author, has said, "The art of mothering is to teach the art of living to children." I believe that this Bible passage is using the art of mothering to help us understand the art of living.

How do we do that? How do we help one another understand the art of living? What are the necessary ingredients for a fulfilling life? I've always appreciated something I'm sure you all are familiar with.

The original piece was written by Dorothy Law Nolte, and it is entitled "Children Learn What They Live." There are several take-offs of that original version, and I'd like to share one that I found that I've modified a bit for our purposes today.

If children live with encouragement, they learn confidence.

If children live with praise, they learn to appreciate.

If children live with fairness, they learn justice.

If children live with security, they learn to have faith.

If children live with approval, they learn to like themselves.

If children live with acceptance and friendship, they learn to find love in the world.

Basically, what this version and the original are trying to make sure we understand is that children grow into strong, healthy and competent adults through the simple process of learning by example. Who among us doesn't want our future generations to be filled with those who are confident, appreciative of the goodness of life, fair in

their dealings with others, faithful to God, themselves and others, and who know how to create and find love in the world around them?

The province of Ontario in Canada has actually developed a grassroots initiative which is promoting the creation of an environment that does just that. Their goal is defined as providing a climate in which children have a healthy start, an adult who cares, a safe place to learn and grow, the tools to succeed and a chance to make a difference.

It seems to me that those are exactly the things we're talking about when we say that we want to help our children, and one another, develop the art of living. In fact, I remember distinctly a discussion Mike and I had sometime during Erin's teen years about that very thing. Our long-term goal was clear, and I'm sure the same is true for all of us. We wanted to help our daughter become a young woman who was a happy, healthy, well-rounded person.

The Bible passage really highlights the way that can happen. We adults need to nurture those who follow behind us; we need to carry them and support them when necessary, and let them spread wings and fly when the time comes. We need to catch them when they fall, comfort them when they're hurt, and help them stand again. We need to treat those who come after us with love and acceptance, and when we do, I'm convinced that they will be strong and healthy.

However, for me, there's something that's missing in the Bible passage, and although implied, is really missing in "Children Learn What They Live." That's the importance of showing respect for everyone we encounter. Joan Feeney wrote a short article about an interaction she had with her four-year-old daughter that pointed out the perils of treating our children with disrespect. Her little girl was trying her best to put peas up her nose while at the dinner table, and her mother stopped her as any parent would, but it was the way she stopped her that caused her child to question her. The child said to her mother, "Momma, please talk to me in your nice voice. I don't like the voice you're using."

Whoa! How many times has the tone of our voice showed contempt or disrespect for someone we profess to love, either a child or another adult? Maybe it's not even been the words we use, which can be doubly detrimental, but it's the way we say things. Feeney said that the words she used weren't all that bad, but she said that she used a voice that she would never have used in public, and it was a voice that was disrespectful. She

wrote, "No question that by treating anyone disrespectfully, I diminish the respect I have for myself. And I'm terrified of teaching a certain four-year-old, by my example, the wrong lessons about respect and fairness." Clearly, she understands that children learn what they live.

That's the long and short of it. Those of us who are supposed to be the adults probably need to realize that others are learning by our example. Perhaps we need to take a good hard look at how we're interacting with our kids, our grandkids, our partners, our colleagues, our students at school, our friends, anyone we encounter. Are we showing the kind of respect that loving one another warrants? Are we helping others learn the art of living by the example we're providing? If we're not, maybe it's time for us to examine our ways, and make a conscious effort to change, both inwardly and outwardly.

After all, it seems to me that there are certain lessons we want others to know and follow, and those are the lessons we are teaching by the way we're living. If I had to summarize mine, I'd do it by saying this to our daughter: Always believe in what you're doing. Always respect yourself and others. Always know that you are loved. Help others, and never forget how much you've enriched our lives and the lives of others because of being who you are.

Closing:

Dorothy Fisher said best what I want to say with these words: "A mother is not a person to lean on but a person to make leaning unnecessary." And so it is.

Have a great Mother's Day, and go in peace. Amen.