

Take Care

14 May 2006
(Mother's Day)

Bible passage: I Thessalonians 2:7 (*The Message*)

"We were never patronizing, never condescending, but we cared for you the way a mother cares for her children. We loved you dearly. Not content to just pass on the message, we wanted to give you our hearts. And we *did*."

You may have heard about the mother who was worried to death about her son's going off to college. She was so concerned that she wrote a letter to the president of the college he was planning to attend. The letter went like this: Dear President Jones: My son has been accepted for admission to your college and soon he will be leaving me. I am writing to ask that you give your personal attention to the selection of his roommate. I want to be sure that he doesn't get someone who uses foul language, or tells off-color jokes, smokes, drinks, uses drugs, or chases after women. You see, this is the first time my son will be away from home, except for his three years in the Marine Corps." Ah—a mother's loving care...

Today is Mother's Day, and to be quite honest, it's always a bit difficult for me to prepare a message for this day. That's because I know, as do you, that there are as many different experiences with mothers as there are people in this room. Some of us have had mothers who are loving and caring and devoted, and some of us have not had that kind of experience. There are examples of close relationships with our parents, and those that are not so close.

There are some here whose mothers have recently died, and regardless of the nature of the relationship, that is a most difficult time. I know there are parents here who have lost children, and that can make this day extremely painful. And from my own experience, I know there are some here who want to be parents, and yet may never have that opportunity, for any number of reasons.

And, as one who has had the opportunity to be a Mom, I have to tell you that it certainly has plenty of joys, but there are challenging times, as well. In fact, when I was teaching, I recall that someone said to me, "Only a Mother can love an 8th grader." When our daughter was an 8th grader, I'll have to tell you that I even questioned that! Not really, but there were times....

When a child comes into our lives, parents take on the responsibility of caring for that child. Frankly, most kids don't come with a 'how-to' manual, and being a good parent is something we learn by trial and error, and sometimes we do that well, and other times we don't.

I suspect that most of us adults wished our parents had done some things differently. That's just the nature of the beast, but I

have to say to you that I believe, in most cases, parents are trying to do their best. And whatever grudges we may hold against them for one thing or another are probably best given over to God, and let go of. No parent is perfect, and every one of us has made our share of mistakes. That's just the way life goes. Nonetheless, whatever our experience has been, I would hope that each of us has at least some awareness of the loving care that came to us as we were growing up, and the care we are giving toward those in our keeping.

I find it interesting that Paul, the writer of our Bible passage, likens his care for those in the church in Thessalonica to the loving care a mother has for her child. Our version of the passage goes like this: "We were never patronizing, never condescending, but we cared for you the way a mother cares for her children. We loved you dearly. Not content to just pass on the message, we wanted to give you our hearts. And we *did*."

Let's think about what Paul is saying. For one thing, this is as personal as Paul ever gets, and he's emphasizing his investment in the life of those he has come to know and love. He is saying all this in a time and place where other preachers and promoters were traveling around taking advantage of people, and he affirms that's not what he is about.

The depth of his loving care is evident in two places. He says, "We loved you dearly." And then he says that his time with them was not just about the message he wanted to share, but he says, "We wanted to give you our hearts. And we *did*."

That's really what taking care of someone is all about. It's about loving with a depth we can hardly imagine possible, and it's about giving our hearts in a total and unconditional way. Elizabeth Stone understood that when she said, "Making the decision to have a child—it's momentous. It is to decide forever to have your heart go walking around outside your body."

I'd like for us to think for a few minutes what the nature of caring for someone might be. I suspect we have many different perspectives on that, and I'd really like to hear them all. However, that's not possible in this setting, so you're just going to get mine, for whatever they're worth.

Taking care of someone—what does that mean? I suspect that the first thing that comes to mind for those who are taking care of young children is, "Are you crazy, McCoy? That's all I do!" And so it is when kids are young. They rely on us for everything, and our job is to provide for their basic needs—things like food to eat and a warm bed in which to sleep. They are totally reliant in those first critical years, and that's when they learn about trusting us to be there for them, and to hold them with arms of love, helping them grow in confidence and strength.

But quickly, things change, and our care takes on a new shape. For one thing, it has to do with helping our children learn to take care of themselves. I hope our desire in caring for our children is not to keep them totally dependent on us for their entire lives,

but to prepare them to live life on their own, with their own visions of what their lives are to be, and not our visions for them.

The writer of *The Prophet*, Kahlil Gibran, says this so beautifully in his section on parenting. He writes, "You may give them your love, but not your thoughts, for they have their own thoughts. You may house their bodies, but not their souls, for their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit. You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you, for life goes not backward nor carries with yesterday. You are the books from which your children as living arrows are sent forth."

He's affirming that the hard task of parenting or of any other form of relationship, is loving deeply and completely, yet always with the task of letting go well in mind. We're here to prepare those in our care to go on without us. As Elaine Heffner, a psychotherapist and author put it, "The art of mothering is to teach the art of living to children."

But that implies something else, doesn't it? It implies that we *know* the art of living. I don't know about you, but I've never been quite sure that I've got that part down pat. It seems to me that we all do a lot of learning and growing at the same time that we're trying to help those in our care learn and grow. Sometimes, we may be like kids taking care of other kids!

Let me tell you what I think is vitally important in taking care of our children: it's taking care of ourselves. In my experience, we need to be happy, healthy people in order to care for others. If we're stressed and chaotic, our families will be that way. If we feel peaceful, calm and in a sense of harmony, those traits will manifest themselves in our homes.

I'm not a big fan of Dr. Phil, but he wrote something that I do happen to agree with. He said, "If you truly love your children, and I know you do, then you will take care of their mother." While we could interpret that in a variety of ways, the way I understand it is that we don't stop being who we really are when we become mothers. We must stay true to who we are, and we have to realize that there isn't a mold into which we're cast when we become mothers. Each of us is a unique person, with our own set of skills, energies, traits and characteristics. That's what we bring to the role of parent.

As hard as it may seem, we as caregivers, have to take care of ourselves first, or we're of little or no use to others. Although many of us have been trained to serve first, and think about ourselves last, that, in my view, is not the best way for us to be. Again, Dr. Phil named it with these words: "We are like bank accounts. If all you ever do is make withdrawals, you're going to wind up with a zero balance or worse. You simply cannot give away what you don't have."

I hope you'll indulge me while I share from my own experience. I was a stay-at-home Mom when our daughter first arrived into our family, but I wasn't very good at it. I had always worked outside the home, and I had some growing to do to come to

terms with my worth and identity not being dependent on a paycheck. During her early years, I was growing, too, and when she began first grade, I started seminary full-time.

Believe me, I felt plenty guilty about it for quite a while, but I was amazed at how well she took it in stride. As she got older, and we began sharing more, I began to realize that I was (at least in my opinion, and I think, hers) a better mother than I would have been had I continued in trying to remain at her beck and call all the time. She knew that I was happy and fulfilled, and that seemed to make her happy, too. We need to care for ourselves in the midst of caring for others.

We are the ones who, most of the time, provide comfort and care for our children, our aging parents, our partners, our friends and colleagues. It is important sometimes to "mother" ourselves. Although we may not dare express it, most of us have times that we yearn to be comforted, and there are times that we need someone special to hold us close, and reassure us that tomorrow, everything will be OK again.

That's what Mother's Day is all about. It's honoring those who have given themselves for us, and giving some of that loving care back. Today, if our mothers are living still, I hope that we will take the time to say "thank you," and to show our love and appreciation to those who've given so much for us. If our mothers have entered eternity, as mine has, I hope that we will take time to whisper a prayer of thanks, in love, to our mothers, knowing that they did the best they could. And today, I hope that each and every one of us can be a mother to ourselves, taking care of ourselves, too.

CLOSING:

Suze Orman has said, "To be a good parent is also to be a good role model and a good teacher. Show your kids you love and have pride in yourself." To that, I say, ditto.

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