

"I love you just the way you are"

Sermon Rev. Rachel Thompson

Bedford Presbyterian Church, Bedford NY

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Scripture: from Psalm 90 Petersen translation

Oh! Teach us to live well!

Teach us to live wisely and well!

Let your servants see what you're best at –
the ways you rule and bless your children.

And let the loveliness of our Lord, our God rest on us,
confirming the work that we do.

Oh yes. Affirm the work that we do!

Because it's Labor Day weekend, I'm going to talk about the most basic job that many of us do, raising children. And, all due respect to the great and loving dads here, this morning I'm going to focus on the work of women.

When I was in seminary, in the late 90s, I had a preaching class assignment to just sit somewhere and observe life going on around me. I walked over to a park on Riverside Drive, a few blocks from Union Seminary. It was a beautiful September afternoon, warm and golden. I found a playground and sat down on a bench with my lunch, such as it was, in a brown paper bag. It felt a little odd to me to be there without a child, and I wondered if others would perceive me as a potential child-molesting pervert, or perhaps a lonely childless woman coming to gaze wistfully at others' happiness.

In fact, I sat there remembering the hours, days, weeks, months I spent in city playgrounds like this one, with my two sons, often quite happily, but sometimes bored out of my skull, feeling absolutely saintly when one of them wanted me to push him on the swings and I would, one more time, with patience dredged up from some diminishing deep, say yes. I feel that I have to say here that I love my sons and that being a mother has been the major transformative experience of my life. I haven't regretted it for one minute and I've been grateful for these boys every day of their lives.

But I was not always a happy playground or Candyland-playing mom. I loved to play with them, but there were times when I was grateful for an interlude of grown-up activities and grown-up conversation.

So it wasn't wistfulness I was feeling as I watched the current crop of saintly mothers, fathers, and caregivers pushing toddlers on swings, helping them up slides and cheering as they came down, refereeing many fights, disciplining thoroughly unruly boys.

Two women came into the playground together, each with what looked like a four-year-old boy, and one with a toddler girl, and the other an infant. These two women were clearly good friends and tried hard to converse with each other, but it was impossible. The boys were the unruly scrappers I just mentioned, bullying another little boy when they weren't fighting each other. The toddler girl was alternately whiney and weepy; she didn't like the cheese sandwich her mother had brought for her lunch. The infant seemed pleasant enough, but needed to be fed and have its diaper changed. I don't think these women managed to eke out five minutes of conversation in the hour I was there, so busy were they with the needs of their children.

I was appalled by the more aggressive boy, but his mother was wonderful with him -- firm yet loving, trying to guide him toward more civil behavior without altogether destroying his sense of himself. The grace and patience shown by these two women to their children was remarkable, and yet so common as to be unremarkable, too.

We hear frequently about the violent abuse of children when all systems fail -- the child welfare system, the courts, the family system, the network of friends most of us count on, and at the deepest level, the innate individual instinct to protect one's young. I thought a lot about this when my two boys were little. I think I never experienced a love so profound or a homicidal instinct so real as I did once I became a mother.

Here's a story from when my boys were little: My sons are three years apart and my husband, an opera singer, traveled a lot. In 1984, we moved to Brooklyn from San Francisco. Shortly after we moved, my husband was on the road for several weeks and I was left alone with an infant and a 4-year-old. The four-year-old was in nursery school, but I hadn't made any friends yet. I was pretty much at my wit's end. The older

boy developed a cough that kept us both up at night. The younger one was a terrible sleeper anyway, waking several times a night and calling for me. I fell asleep standing up one night, trying to get him to go back to sleep. What I'm trying to paint here is a portrait of a woman -- exhausted, depleted, wrung out by the demands of motherhood.

I was really tired of hanging out, friendless, in playgrounds, and tired of losing at Candyland; desperate for more adult conversation than I was getting; envious of women chatting with each other in cafes; or of couples, looking like they were headed out for the evening as I sat on the stoop with my kids. I repeat, I adored my kids, but I was feeling trapped and housebound. Mr. Rogers, on television, was my best friend because he'd look at me through the TV, with my messy hair and my spit-up stained sweatshirt and tell me that he loved me, just the way I was.

I remember during that time getting into an argument with the 4-year-old about going to a birthday party that he had been invited to. I was so excited about going to this birthday party because I could go along and visit with some other mothers there. I could talk to adults about adult things! I had been looking forward to this birthday party for a week. I had a nice gift all wrapped. But when it was time to go to the party, when I was all dressed and ready and had the baby ready to go, my son threw a tantrum and refused to leave his room. He had decided he didn't want to go to the party. When it became clear to me that the only way I would get him there was to carry him under my arm, screaming, into the birthday boy's house, I went into a rage. All of my loneliness and resentment came up and. . . yes it's true -- I wanted to kill him.

I didn't kill him of course, or even lay a hand on him, but the strength of my anger unnerved me. I had to leave the room to go calm down. I felt that I was close to losing control and if there had been any more pressure on me in any direction, I might have. That experience created in me some understanding of people who do lose control. I certainly don't mean to say that I'm in favor of flinging unruly children out the nearest window, but I understand how the impulse can arise. I thought, if I could come this close to the edge, what about someone who has fewer resources than I do? Someone who has the relentless pressures of poverty; who has no escape from a dreary apartment in a dangerous neighborhood; who perhaps has an abusive partner, or no

partner at all. Add to that the almost constant demands of small children, and at some point a person could snap.

So the truly amazing thing is that almost all of the time, people don't snap. People have children, and women, for the most part, care for them when they're small. Watching the two women in the park with their unremarkable patience, their unremarkable generosity, their unremarkable love for their children, filled me with awe. I thought of women from the beginning of time who have loved their children so fiercely, who have served them with enormous joy and sometimes with controlled rage, but who have by and large done an infinitely complex, hugely demanding job well -- for no good reason and no reward but the inexorable force of love. There's God, I thought, alive and well. God in us, around us, and through us -- world without end. Amen.

p.s. Here's the great irony in this story. I don't have any grandchildren yet. At this stage in my life, I'm DYING to hang out in a park and push some adorable little person in a swing and DYING to lose at Candyland. With some luck, I'll get to do those things again. That's the circle of life, isn't it? Thanks be to God.