

Otherworldly

John 17:6-19

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Mother's Day

By

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

There is a story about four pastors discussing the merits of various translations of the Bible. One liked the King James Version for its poetic and simple English; another liked the American Standard Version best because it is more literal and comes nearer the original Greek and Hebrew versions; and still another likes the New Revised Standard Version because it incorporates the newest language discoveries of the Dead Sea Scrolls. The fourth minister remained silent. When asked to express his opinion, he replied, "I like my mother's translation best." The other three expressed surprise. They did not know that his mother had translated the Bible. "Yes, she did," he replied. "She translated it into life, and it was the most convincing translation I ever saw."

I hope you had such a mother. I hope you are such a mother, or father, or friend, or partner. I know that the Lord, the Creator, who made you loves you with a sacrificial and unconditional love that goes beyond any you have ever known. You belong to the family of this Lord. You are a child of God. We are brothers and sisters in the extended family of faith meant to walk beside one another. By the power of God's love, you can find the power to become a loving parent, whatever challenges you may be facing in your family. Let us give thanks for mothers today, and those who nurture others, and for our family heritage. And let us work together to extend the love of Christ to those with distant families, and those without families, and those with broken families. The need has never been greater for the Church to be the extended family of God!

My mother is a remarkable and accomplished woman. She raised five children while completing graduate school and then working full time. I grew up in a home with two working parents before it was fashionable. My mom was also active in politics throughout the turbulent 1960s and beyond, becoming the head of the Metropolitan Health Board and serving on the Board of Governors for the University of Minnesota Hospital. There is an annual lecture in the School of Nursing there in her name. But sometimes her work and passion for other led her to overlook the needs of her own children. On one occasion, probably leading up to the 1968 election year, my mother was in downtown Minneapolis at a political convention. She had recently given birth to my little sister who was probably

less than a year old at the time, whom she left in the care of my other sister who was eight years old at the time.

Someone at the convention asked my mother, “Who is watching your baby?” She replied, “My eight-year-old daughter.” When the other woman looked horrified my mother decided she better call and check on them. If my baby sister could have spoken, she might have said, “You really think that leaving me with her is a good idea? She’s eight years old! What are you thinking?”

These were the days before cell phones. You had to go out to the lobby and find the bank of public phones and then come up with at least a dime for a local call, or call collect through the operator. My mother called home and there was no answer. With her imagination running wild about the disaster that was unfolding, she began to panic. She kept phoning until finally my sister answered the phone. “Is everything alright!?” “Yes, mom.” “Why didn’t you pick up the phone earlier?” “I was changing the baby and you told me never to leave her on the changing table for any reason,” my sister replied. Whew! Maybe it wasn’t such a good idea to leave an infant in the care of an eight year old. But then, that eight-year-old was remarkably responsible, much more so than I was several years older. I’m not advocating this situation, you understand. Today you could be arrested for such parenting but back in the day, before there were seat belts, things were different.

Our text this morning has Jesus leaving the disciples and all his followers in one another’s care. “Seriously! You think this is a good idea, leaving them in the care of one another?” They must have felt like my sister perhaps did, incapable of handling such a large responsibility. Jesus left them in the care of one another and prayed for their protection. He just seems to have confidence in his followers and in mothers despite evidence that calls that confidence into question.

Monica was a woman in history known for her effectiveness and tenacity as a mother. Born in the year 332 in North Africa to a family of nobility but little wealth, Monica showed an early “desire for eternal things”, and was often given to prayer and found at church. She had an intense concern for the poor, sometimes saving food from her own plate to share with those in need. At age 22, she married a man twice her age — more

her parent's idea than her own. She was a Christian and her husband was not. She was pious and he was not. Her biographer says that her marriage condemned her to a life-long martyrdom. If that wasn't enough, soon after her marriage her mother-in-law came to live with them. Even though her husband was annoyed with her praying and with her charities, she quietly continued these expressions of her devotion.

Her devotion to her children was equally impressive. She had two boys and a girl. She prayed that God would help her as a parent to raise them well. At the birth of her first child, she dedicated him to the Lord in a religious ceremony that involved the sign of the cross upon his forehead but baptism was postponed until a later time. She molded her son's mind and spirit from his earliest days but he revolted against his studies and refused to apply himself. He lied and deceived his parents. He stole from them, and cheated at games. It was as if he embodied the conflict between the characters of his two parents.

Monica continued to pray for him. He went off to school and was exceedingly bright but it didn't affect the way he lived. He became involved with a woman who soon became pregnant and a son was born to them. They were unmarried and Monica was heartbroken. She wept and even today there is a feast day in honor of her on the 4th of May in the Roman Catholic Church – the feast of tears of a Christian mother. Monica's son finally came around. He became one of the greatest intellects of Christian faith – St. Augustine. He was always quick to say that it was his mother who led him to Christian faith. “Yes, Lord, if I am your servant, it is because I am the son of your handmaiden.” And “To my mother, to her prayers and merits, I owe all that I am.” And “If I love truth above all else, and for its sake would lay down my life, for this I am indebted to my mother, whose prayers God could not withstand.”

On Easter Sunday 387 Augustine was baptized, at age 27. That same year his mother died. Twice through great labor she had given birth to her son, once into the world and once again into the reign of the Lord. We are meant to live in this world but to focus upon the life to come. We are meant to be otherworldly. St. Augustine later wrote these rather well known words, “You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they rest in thee.” These were no empty words for him but born of the restlessness which marked his early life. Augustine knew from personal experience what

restlessness was all about. His mother's love and faithfulness made all the difference. She continued to dream big and continued to invest in her son, despite the limited response. The labor of childbirth is only the beginning of the labor that mothers encounter in raising children. She was focused not only on this world but also on eternity. She loved all the way into the next world.

Most of us parents have had the experience of leaving the hospital after the birth of our first child. After we successfully navigate the discharge procedures, mom and baby are probably wheeled out by some orderly to the waiting car by the front entrance. I can remember thinking, "We don't have a clue what we're doing here! Are you sure you want to let this baby come home with us?" Despite the birthing classes and parenting classes, we knew we were totally unqualified to be parents. And yet God apparently had confidence in us, and so did the hospital staff. And so did our families. With great responsibility comes great opportunity to rise to the occasion.

Jesus leaves us in the care of one another, and prays for unity for those who follow him. Sadly that unity often eludes us as we splinter and fracture into thousands of denominations. Even within our church, we too often criticize one another rather than assist one another and walk alongside one another through some of life's most difficult terrain: the loss of loved ones, disappointments, difficulties in raising our children. You know, this is the time of year when we recruit Sunday school teachers for next year, and when the Officer Nominating Committee contacts people to invite them into leadership as officers of the church. We need singers in the choir next year, and volunteers in the office, and help preparing communion elements, and help setting up the sanctuary for worship each week. Love requires decisions and sacrifices as every mother knows. What are you doing to love those around you this morning? Maybe this is the year you can step into leadership or greater involvement in this community of faith.

Jesus has left us in one another's care. "Do you really think that is a good idea, Lord?" With great responsibility comes opportunity for greatness! We can rise to the occasion and take on the task that is before us. Do you know that in our country today, almost 40% of births are to non-married mothers? Single parenting is almost a prescription for poverty. We, in the church, can do more to assist these parents with their responsibilities.

Jesus left us in the care of one another, all the way to the next life.

Erma Bombeck once wrote, "I have a feeling that when my kids march down the aisle to join in holy wedlock the persons with whom they are going to share the rest of their lives, I will pass them a clean nose tissue, spit on their shoes, and shout: 'They need more work. Give me a minute. I'm not finished yet.'" She goes on to write, "To some adults, it's like admitting defeat. We are committed to hanging in there until they at least know the basics. They should know that towels belong on a rack and not on the floor. They should know that when they receive the Nobel Prize, they are expected to say 'Thank you,' and maybe follow up with a nice note." Apparently the job of mothering is never really finished.

The Lord is not finished with us. "They need more work, give me a minute, I'm not finished yet," says the Lord. Okay, well, maybe the Lord hasn't quite said that but as our heavenly parent, God probably has expressed something similar about us. We are included in the family that belongs to Jesus Christ. We are loved by God and are commanded to love one another. We are each given a huge responsibility: to love one another all the way into the next life. Let's rise to the occasion. Amen