

## **Mother's Day sermon**

Today is Mother's Day. We honor mothers. . . .

We honor mothers because we're concerned about the Christian family. We're concerned about the nuclear family. Children need mothers and fathers. No matter how much it is said in the culture that any arrangement will do, all that matters is that there is love, we say: No, just as every child has a mother and a father, children need mothers and fathers. Family matters.

That's not to say all families are healthy and good. Or even that all mothers are good. Some mothers can be smothering and overbearing. Some mothers neglect their children.

There is such a thing as mothering. Children are small and weak. They need nurturing and care. It isn't only biological or adoptive mothers who do mothering, it's grandmothers, aunts, neighbors, friends, and others who carry out this great and important work. Over the centuries, over the ages, we have learned as people of this earth this is how it works and what works, and what works is the family. There need to be mothers and fathers for the sake of society, for the sake of the future.

We then in the church emphasize certain things. Martin Luther once said: "Your mother is your first minister." Yet we do not deify mothers. As one mother said: "I have a real problem with Mother's Day because Mothers are lifted up and we're sinners, too. We live by forgiveness." Nevertheless, it is important that we honor and respect mothers.

This brings up two important concerns. First, why isn't God called Mother? There are those who push this concern. There are places in the Bible where this concern is lifted up. Isaiah 49:15: "Can a woman forget her suckling child that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb?" And Isaiah 66:13: "As one whom his mother comforts, so will I comfort you."

In the New Testament, Luke 13:34: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings and you would not!" And Luke 15:8-10 is the parable about the woman who lost her coin, finds it and rejoices. So, the text says: "There is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Also in the New Testament there are the women who are gathered around Jesus as a kind of support group. Just as there were important women in the Old Testament like Huldah the prophetess (2 Kings 22:14-20) and Deborah, one of the judges (Judges 4 and 5).

In the New Testament Mary Magdalene is the first witness to the resurrection. And Mary, Jesus' mother, is important as a figure in his life and at the foot of the cross.

Less known is that there was at the time of Paul, described in the Book of Acts, a woman named Priscilla who was a leader and missionary (18:2). Also in Paul in Romans 16:7: "Greet Andronicus and Junia." You won't find these names recorded accurately in your translations because for centuries a mistake has been made. Bible translators said it couldn't be "Junia," a woman named by Paul as "an apostle before me." So they put an "s" on the end, making the name masculine. There is really no doubt there was a woman apostle before Paul was an apostle.

We must remember that the word "apostle" is not limited to the Twelve. What "apostle" really means is "missionary." In Philippians 2:20 Epaphroditus is called an apostle and fellow worker. Others are missionaries (apostles) as well. And there was conflict, too. In Phil 4:2 Paul pleads with two women to stop fighting with each other. Women are very much a part of the life and ministry of that time.

What about God, whom we call Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? Just as you have a name, and I have a name, "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" is God's name. It is not appropriate to refer to "the Trinity" as if it were God's name. The Trinity is an abstraction. Nor is it right to say that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three different roles. No.

"Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" is God's proper name. God is a person. It's important to note that in the Old Testament God addressed as Father only a few times. The people of the time knew about fertility cults, and they were very worried about any confusion with the fertility gods and goddesses (Baalim and Asherah). They knew that was idolatry and paganism.

God is person, but then what about man and woman, and male and female? It helps to consider grammatical gender. In German there is grammatical gender that is not tied to sexuality. Dog is masculine, *der hund*. Cat is feminine *die katze*. Horse is neuter; *das Pferd*. Grammatical gender has nothing to do with sexuality; it has to do with Indo-European, the language that is behind most of the modern Western languages.

It is more fun in French. French has masculine and feminine gender for nouns. Usually French nouns have gender in a way we would find sensible. But when it comes to the word for beard, it's feminine. This makes no sense to us whatsoever. But it's grammatical gender.

One place when this continues in English is that we talk about a ship as "she." And even this is not as common today as a generation ago.

When people argue about God in terms of the words in the Bible, they sometimes mention that the word "Spirit" is feminine. Not always. It's about half masculine and half feminine in Hebrew. In Syriac it's always feminine. But this again is grammatical gender. What helps us here is if we go to the New Testament, the word for Spirit is neuter. Yet in the Gospel of John in certain places the relative pronoun (this and that) referring to the Spirit is masculine. They knew that the Holy Spirit is a person, not a thing.

Which brings us to our second big concern: What about God's masculinity? When God became one of us, he became a particular one. If you are a human being you are either male or female. In this case, he came at certain time, in a certain place. He had a certain mother, and he was male, and probably had brown eyes and a hooked nose. This is the scandal of particularity.

There are those who say: I can't have a God who isn't like me, who doesn't "represent" me. Some say that God has to be feminine so women can identify with God and find themselves in God. But that's confused thinking.

Rather, as it states in Hebrews 4:15: "For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with us in our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin." What's important is not that he was like us in a particular race or sex, but there was this significant difference, "without sin." That's what salvation is about; salvation is not about representing us in some other way.

Think of the Pigmy people in Africa. They are very short, a genetic variety, because in the jungles of Africa by being short they can walk underneath the brush, and because they are short and slight they can stand the heat better. They have more surface skin for their size.

Does God have to become a Pygmy to represent them? To save them? No! That is to lose entirely what sin, death, and salvation are about. God became one of us and

he was a son and a son has a father, and this is personal. It has to do with the reality, the historicity of the man Jesus.

Finally, there are those who say that the church is our mother. This goes back to an ancient saying by Cyprian and copied by Augustine: "Unless you have the church as your mother, you cannot have God as your father."

Luther said something very different: "The church is the daughter of the Word." The Word of God is the source and comfort of our being.

Therefore we say the church is the daughter of the Word. The church is not that which is behind it all, but the Word of God is.

To sum it all up. We honor mothers on this Mother's Day. We honor family. We honor the personal nature of how God came to be among us for the sake of our salvation. Not following the culture and what it values or doesn't value. But following, as has been true throughout the ages, the basic human way that God became one of us and works among us to help us now and forever. Amen.