

FROM THE PASTOR'S



**Fifth Sunday of Easter
May 10, 2009 B**

A MOTHER'S DAY MOMILY BASED ON JESUS' FAREWELL TO HIS DISCIPLES

The following "momily" is by mother and author, Kathy Caffey. The article appeared in the May '08 edition of St. Anthony's Messenger Magazine.

What every mother wants for her child is an unassailable happiness. When her son is threatened by a bully on the playground, Mom wants him to have the inner strength to resist and find help. When her daughter is hurt by the vicious gossip of high school cliques, Mom wants her to have a security that can eventually get over it and move on. When her son experiences the criticism of a demeaning boss, Mom wants him to have a serenity that isn't destroyed.

Because a mother knows that life holds plenty of negatives, she wants to buoy her children with positives. Joy can be short-lived, so she wants to give them resources that transcend time and space.

A Gift From Jesus

How appropriate, then, that Mother's Day coincides with the proclamation of Jesus' final discourse. It offers the gift moms most desire. (This reflection was based on the excerpt from John that was proclaimed on Mother's Day in 2008.)

The selections from John read at liturgies after Easter comes from Jesus' words at the Last Supper. Because these passages occur so near the end of Jesus' life, they hold a privileged place in the Gospel.

He doesn't have much time left; he can't waste his breath on trivia. What he chooses must be absolutely central to his message, preparing his friends for a world that will be harsh without him.

Like a mother, he sends children forth with the most essential nuggets of his message. These are such life-giving jewels, we should carry them in our pockets or purses, hang them on our refrigerators and, most important, hold them in our hearts.

Our affinity with these texts is based in our life experience. In this case, Jesus' words align perfectly with the experience of motherhood. For example, "we will come to them and make our home with them" (John 14:23, *NRSV*).

Jesus frequently uses the metaphor of home, especially dear to women's hearts. Our homes are probably the places where we are most at ease, relaxed, ourselves. There we create a place of beauty, peace and order, filled with laughter and love. It's also a wonderfully earthy and realistic image. Jesus knows how

much work it takes to maintain a home, because he watched Mary do it.

Women know the enormous amount of time and sheer physical drudgery that goes into housekeeping. A jillion loads of laundry, a couple billion meals, millions of passes with a vacuum or mop are the minimum throughout 20 to 30 years of mothering.

The physical stuff is the *easiest*. The tricky part is nurturing everyone, knowing when to encourage and when to challenge, when to discipline and when to relax, and sometimes how to help warring factions live under one roof. The point of establishing the physical house is to protect and nourish the lives within, so that we eventually become what Jesus describes: homes for each other, the shelter of each other.

Treasure House of Love

In the novel *Hannah Coulter*, Wendel Berry writes of a woman remembering her late husband. One of the things they did before his death was to plan an imaginary house. They'd talk about the fireplaces and the porches, where they'd put the bedrooms and the living room, what color they'd paint each room, how they'd furnish and decorate it—all in their imaginations.

"Of all the kind things he did for me, that house was the kindest," recalls the wife. "I could see that love is a great room with a lot of doors where we are invited to knock and come in. Though it contains all the world, the sun, moon and stars, it is so small as to be also in our hearts...in the presence of that long flow of love, even grief could not stand..."

The shadow of death hangs over Jesus' head as it does for all of us. In John's Gospel, Jesus addresses one of the hardest things in any relationship: that we will someday say a final goodbye as he is saying at the last Supper.

Even before that, we sometimes fail each other; we betray those we love most. In the rush of events or too much pressure or not enough time, we miss each other's shining radiance.

Despite those failures, God still chooses to make God's dwelling place with us. There aren't too many places where we choose to make our dwelling with strangers—maybe the college dorm or summer camp.

Usually, we live with those we love most. God's wanting to dwell with us should allay anxieties about our failures. As Demetrius Dumm writes in *A Mystical Portrait of Jesus: New Perspectives on John's Gospel*, "Jesus offers us the key to the Father's treasure house of infinite love. To know that experientially is to have no more fear and to enjoy a peace beyond imagining."

The Keys to the House

These passages from John's gospel offer keys to this house:

“Live on in me as I do in you” (John 15:4).

The last Supper context of Jesus' farewell in John's gospel is a homey one. Many women would say the kitchen is the heart of the household, and Jesus speaks in a most natural, familial setting where people have just eaten. There, John leans back onto Jesus' breast, seeing the world from the secure perspective.

Most moms remember a small child, leaning back into the maternal lap, thumb firmly in mouth, ruling the world from that stance. The child surveys the universe with ease because she has the most secure place in it.

John suggests the only way we can really see the world accurately is from that position of leaning on the heart of Jesus. John is creating a deliberate parallel here: Just as Jesus knows God's secrets and hears God's heartbeat, so we humans like John, can enjoy that privileged place as well.

Thus, according to Dumm, John says that our feeble loving is joined to Jesus' all-powerful love to make it wonderfully fruitful.

As children derive their identity from their parents, so humans are made in God's image. While Jesus prepares the disciples for his physical leaving, he promises to remain in them spiritually. When he says this, mothers and children nod in recognition.

Even if a child lives on the other side of the country, or a mom is on the other side of death, we carry each other within. We smile in the same way, have the same mannerisms or speak in such similar tones that people often confuse mothers and daughters when they answer the phone. The poet David Whyte describes this unity with his mother as “the great sweep/of her unspoken life into mine.”

Jesus' use of the birth metaphor is unique for a man of his time and speaks eloquently to women. Here, only figurative language can carry the meaning he tries to convey. Of all the images Jesus could have used for his approaching passion, he chose one from women's experience. Even those who may not have given birth physically know the ardor of nurture, the long waits, the absences, frustrations and disappointments of any who cherish their young. No joy matches that of seeing them achieve success, mature or eventually parent their own children.

Perhaps it is this confidence that the wait will be fruitful and the labor will bring new life that instills what Jesus calls “a peace that the world cannot give.”

While all parents want to protect their children, ultimately, they also want more. They want what Jesus promises his friends at the last Supper: participation in the very life of God. The unity between parent and child, like the unity among all believers, is lifted to a new plane when Jesus explains that it is identical with his own union to the Father.

Parents are more familiar than anyone with their children's failings and vice versa. But Jesus addresses the Father, saying that “you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (17:23). In our Creator's love for us, as in mother's and children's love for each other, all that divides is forgotten; all that wounds is forgiven.

“The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you” (John 14:26).

The idea of God as teacher brings us back to the idea of parents as first mentors or teachers. Forget for a minute all the usual paraphernalia of schooling—saints, grades, formal classroom setting. Consider, instead, the dramatic learning that occurs in the first year of life. At birth, the human infant is helpless, droopy and sleepy. She can't support her head; her only language is a cry. But 12 months later, this little person can communicate her needs, eat solid food, crawl or toddle around, and understand much of what is going on around her.

It all happens so gradually that parents are somewhat oblivious. (They're also foggy from lack of sleep.) And, of course, there are delays and setbacks. It's like what Anne Lamott says in *Grace (Eventually): Thoughts on Faith*: “I wish grace was more abracadabra. That delicate silver bells would ring to announce grace's arrival. But no, its clog and slog and skooch...I grew up thinking that lessons should be more like the von Trapp family children: more marionettes and dirndls and harmonies. But no: its slog, bog, skooch.”

Throughout this long, arduous beginning of human development, the first teachers are unskilled, a mom or dad who probably didn't take any courses called Babies 101. Parents rely on instinct, high expectations and blazing affection. And what they accomplish gives a little glimpse of who God as teacher must be.

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you” (John 14:27).

If we let that gift of peace from Jesus wash over us, it relaxes our anxiety, releases our burdens, prompts in us a joyful response of gratitude for the ultimate good news.

To sum up, we've been invited into a lovely home and a sharing in the very life of God. There we will learn all that matters most from the best teacher ever and enter into his promise of peace.

Happy Mother's Day,

