

“We All Need Mothering”
A Sermon by the Rev. Dottie Mathews

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CALL TO GATHER:

It seems to me that the whole secret of life,
if it is to be happy,
is in the spirit of love;
And when an old form of love dies,
we must take on the new.
If life is to be made interesting
and worth its breath,
we must look on ourselves as growing children,
right up to the end of our days. ~ W. H. Davies

READING: *Invisible Work* by Alison Luterman

Because no one could ever praise me enough,
because I don't mean these poems only
but the unseen, unbelievable effort it takes to live
the life that goes on between them,
I think all the time about invisible work.
About the young mother on Welfare
I interviewed years ago,
who said, "It's hard.
You bring him to the park,
run rings around yourself keeping him safe,
cut hot dogs into bite-sized pieces for dinner,
and there's no one
to say what a good job you're doing,
how you were patient and loving
for the thousandth time even though you had a headache."
And I, who am used to feeling sorry for myself
because I am lonely,
when all the while,

as the Chippewa poem says, I am being carried
by great winds across the sky,
[I] thought of the invisible work that stitches up the world day and night,
the slow, unglamorous work of healing,
the way worms in the garden
tunnel ceaselessly so the earth can breathe
and bees ransack this world into being,
while owls and poets stalk shadows,
our loneliest labors under the moon.
There are mothers
for everything, and the sea
is a mother too,
whispering and whispering to us
long after we have stopped listening.
I stopped and let myself lean
a moment, against the blue
shoulder of the air. The work
of my heart
is the work of the world's heart.
There is no other art.

SERMON:

The market projection people were a bit disappointed this year --- according to their calculations, we in the United States will only spend about \$15.8 billion¹ to celebrate our mothers. Yes, I did say billion. That's a lot of course, but it's actually less than we spent last year -- so it appears that economic changes are being felt even in such a "sacred" holiday as this.

Lest you think I am being sanctimonious, let it be known that I, too, participate in Mothers Day. My own mother is long dead, but Rosie & I always honor her mother who is in her 90's and I often remember others who have played maternal roles in my life. When my children were little, I used to get *them* gifts on Mothers Day because, I reasoned, without them I would not have had the joyful privilege of being a Mother.

But, I have to say that I was astounded to really think about that number - \$15.8 billion dollars, especially in light of catastrophes like Burma, and New Orleans, and so many others that are prominent in our minds. You can't help but think of the wells that could have built, the schools, the food, the housing. As we are learning more about the worldwide ramifications of our lifestyles, it made me wonder what Third World person may have opted to grow flowers for FTD rather than grow food needed by his village.

Clearly, this holiday (like so many things we celebrate) has become a boon to domestic spending. And I am ever-increasingly aware of how we have been manipulated to equate love of one another, love of country with consumerism.

¹ According to the National Retail Federation 2008 Survey. Available online at http://www.nrf.com/modules.php?name=News&op=viewlive&sp_id=505. Last accessed May 10, 2008.

In fact, in writing this, I'm thinking that next year, maybe we can propose something new. Maybe in 2009, this Fellowship could decide on some local cause and be able to say something like, "Mom, instead of giving you one more disposable knick knack, I put my money with other Fellowship people and we helped get needed medical care for a child in the Fox Cities" or "...we paid the rent for a single parent." Maybe, next year, we can put our hearts together to meet a real need like that in our community. What do you think?²

And, incidentally, that idea would make the originators of Mothers Day happy too. Apparently, this holiday has stirred controversy since its beginnings in the U.S. I had heard - perhaps you did too - that Julia Ward Howe, writer of the Battle Hymn of the Republic, had been one of the driving forces behind commemorating this day. Far from what I just described, though, it was her intention to unite all mothers - all women - for the cause of peace after the country's devastation from the Civil War.

What I did not know is that she had been influenced by an Appalachian woman named Anna Jarvis who was also a social activist at the time. Jarvis organized women to work together for better sanitary conditions during and after that war. They worked for all - Union and Confederate. She called those collaborative days "Mothers' Work Days." The story goes that after her death, her daughter (also named Anna) took up her passion to honor that the hard work of women by some sort of a national holiday, similar to the many days publicly honoring men's accomplishments.

The younger Anna must have inherited her mother's skill for organizing because it only took her a few years to be successful! In 1914 Woodrow Wilson declared the first national Mothers Day celebration. But (and this is where it gets interesting) very quickly, this became a definite case of "be careful what you wish for" because it took less than a decade (just nine years) for the day to become so commercialized and off point that the younger Anna Jarvis made her regrets quite widely known. There are even stories about her publicly protesting, filing law suits, and on at least one occasion being arrested, as she tried to stop the force of the marketing machine she had unintentionally ignited. Despite her best efforts to halt it all, as we so well know, that machine has barreled forward relentlessly and exponentially.

And, I know, it's not just in the U.S. Some form of this holiday is celebrated all over the globe. It's just our peculiarly American spin that makes it seem like such a monumental exploitation of consumer spending.

But let's not be cynical. I know that this weekend can offer time for a really sweet celebration. It's often helpful to have a time set apart to remember and give thanks - a time to feel grateful for the tender loving care we've received in our lifetimes.

And, truth be told, my research forced me take that bit of a tangent on consumerism but my message is far less about this holiday, or about recognizing the woman who gave birth to you or adopted you, or even about the progeny that you helped (or are helping) to bring to adulthood. It is really about the depth of our needs for nurturing - and how frequently all the hype that circulates about what a good mother/parent should be, very rarely reflects the reality of people's lives.

²This idea generated enough positive response that we even have volunteers to help coordinate it next year. My great thanks goes to Lisa and Olivia Hood! See also these websites provided by Michelle Tichy for related ideas:

www.mothersactingup.org/
www.momsrising.org/

It's funny in light of that nearly 16 billion we spend, we also seem to have a kind of split personality about our feelings toward our maternal parents. For every gauzy, dewy-eyed hallmark commercial out there, there's also a joke circulating like this one:

Three elderly mothers are sitting on a bench outside a shopping centre talking about how much their children love them.

The first one says "You know the gorgeous painting hanging in my living room? My son bought that for me for my birthday. What a good boy he is! He loves his mother!"

The second one says, "You think that's love? You know the new car I just got? That was a Mother's Day gift from my daughter. What a doll she is!"

The third one says "Oh, that's nothing. My son loves me so much, he tells me he's in therapy EVERY single week, and what does he talk about? Me!!!"

We aren't quite sure what we think about mothering. The word itself evokes feelings. Some equate it to controlling, even suffocating behavior. It is obviously true that very few of us have or had a storybook, totally fulfilling parental relationship with our mothers and, yet, there seems to be an unending need for that kind of nurturing we do long for.

I am frequently reminded of that little birdie character in the children's book – do you remember it? There was a tiny little bird who had fallen out of his nest and the story followed him as he maneuvered his way through the treacherous world asking everyone, "Are you my mommy?" "Are you my mommy?" And isn't that exactly how it feels sometimes? The longing to be cared for and protected does not end when we become "mature" and why should it? It's part of our being human!

Of course, there are life stages when the need is far more critical than others. Science has proven that a newborn's need for gentle, cooing and holding goes far beyond a desire for comfort but an absolute necessity for emotional and physical development. We have heard about the horrible impact on babies who are deprived of that sort of loving care – how their cognitive and emotional abilities are severely impaired for the lack of that sort of overt, constant love.

As youngsters grow, too, we are keenly aware of the need for the right sort of physical and emotional stimulus along with food, shelter, sleep, medical care. We are animals that must be nurtured in order to reach maturity.

For most of us here today, we apparently DID receive adequate amounts of those basic human needs in our early lives. Yet what about all those other goodies that come from the typical picture of the sweet, supportive, "good" mothers?

I don't want to take anything away from honoring this important relationship. I am a mother and, if you know much about my personal life, you very quickly learn that all three of my children are very important to me, even as they have now each clearly reached full independence and adulthood. I am grateful for the frequency of our contact and the mutual love we share.

But I started thinking about all the nurturing I have received – am still receiving - in my life, and the nurturing I have given. And I began to wonder about the components

that go into what we typically think of as “maternal;” not the overbearing kind of mothering that gets joked about but the warm, snuggly, supportive stuff. I think we still need this even as we age and long after our mothers cease to be the sole or even primary source of support in our lives. The way our needs make themselves known changes as our life situation does, but the needs are still there. For instance, go into any home for the elderly and see how comforted the residents are by someone brushing their hair or rubbing their back. These are acts of nurturing ... and we all need them.

So, this is what I mean when I say, “we all need mothering.” I’ve compiled a handful of things here that (even if these things aren’t currently available from a female person we have called Mom, or perhaps if they were never available from her), the need doesn’t vanish. We still look for these qualities elsewhere as we seek to be nurtured in life. My observation is that we need these things no matter our age— no matter our gender – no matter how accomplished we are.

First, we need to be seen as we truly are. In my estimation, this need is colossal. Many people I know spend years and years beating their heads against a wall trying to get their parent or parents, even their siblings, to see and appreciate the essence of who they are in their deepest self. We all want to be recognized and seen as we are, not for as the observer wishes we were - but for who we are at our core. Parker Palmer has a great book entitled, “To Know As We Are Known.” The eloquence of those words always touches me! We long to know others and be known by them in that deep sort of way that sees us with realistic eyes, with a recognition of what makes us tick, and an appreciation for the uniqueness to be found within. We need this sort of nurturing. And we can offer that sort of nurturing to others.

And out of that sort of realistic vision comes the second item. Once seen, we need to know that those eyes view us as beautiful. When we have risked to the point of honestly revealing our soul’s depths to another, we need to be affirmed in our inner beauty.

Whether accurate or not, it is a generally accepted that mothers always think their babies are exceptionally attractive. And, you know, when my third child, Tim, was born, he had a bit of a difficult delivery. He was a large baby and the labor was long and somewhat strenuous, and ...let’s just say...it had a visible impact on him. To me, of course, he was the most gorgeous baby in the world. I was so thoroughly glad to hold him and see that he was all right (glad that we had BOTH survived the delivery).

But you know how they snap those pictures soon after birth? Well, I sent one to my dear sister who was several states away and (you have to know how my sister and I tease each other to get the full impact of this joke) she called me the day she got my note and said, “So thanks for the announcement but ... when that picture of Timothy fell out of the envelope, I picked it up and said ‘She calls THAT a baby??!?!?’”

Of course, she was joking in our usual fashion together, but there’s truth too – she could not possibly see my little guy with the eyes I had for him.

We all need to be seen with those nurturing eyes – whether from our mothers or from others. Eyes that see us as we truly are and that convey that they love what they see. Of course, some of us get this kind of nurturing from our partners or spouses – but we can also find it with close siblings (as my witty sister and I do for one another) and with dear friends. Our faces can register for one another: *I see you as you are and I love you as you are*. This is a crucially important emotional need.

In fact, I hear from folks that's one of the reasons they come here week after week -- to be seen truly and to be loved unquestionably. We all get chills as we sing to our children and to one another that new hymn "...How could anyone ever tell you you're anything less than beautiful?..." We all need nurturing!

In the counseling world, I believe they might call this viewing someone with *unconditional positive regard*. Any psychologists here can correct me if I'm wrong, but it seems that the experts who deal with psychological healing have determined that having that kind of space of full acceptance is needed for our deepest healings to emerge. We all need people who provide that kind of nurturing space in our lives.

I recall with delight Stuart Smalley, the self-help guru character from Saturday Night Live years ago. I don't know how many of you remember his routines on that show, but he used to make me howl with laughter. At the end of each of his segments, with the camera looking over his shoulder, he'd gaze into a mirror and say with utmost sincerity to himself, "You're good enough. You're smart enough. And doggone it, people like you!" There is a bit of Stuart Smalley in most of us, I think.

The list continues: We all need to be recognized for who we are; We all need to be loved for who we are; and, thirdly, We all need to be reinforced in our capabilities to create a productive and happy life for ourselves. When nurturing is done well, it does not guide another person with a precise game plan, it does not tell you what is right and what choices ought to be made. Good nurturing helps you recognize your own abilities and strengths – with those realistic eyes – and encourages you to access your own inner wisdom about choosing your own best path.

This is one of those crucially important life lessons that parents have to learn over and over and over again. In my own mothering/nurturing attempts I sometimes got confused and thought that I needed to get my kids to understand life through my eyes, believing that would bring them the greatest happiness, especially as they reached their teen years and beyond. But then (after a lot of teeth-gritting stress) I came to understand that the best answer I could give my kids when they got themselves wedged into some sort of dilemma was to say (with sincerity), "I completely trust your wisdom to figure this out – and I will be eager to hear the solutions you come up with. And I will help you in every way that is appropriate!"

Believe me, that was not an easy response to offer them. But, the more I practiced it, the more I could see them step up to take hold of their own agency and ability in life. They still ask for advice, of course, but a foundational premise in all our exchanges is that they, too, are wise and capable people and have knowledge about their own life situations that I cannot possibly have. There is an element of deep trust – and faith – in treating others this way. It is a natural outgrowth, too, of our First Principle: recognizing the dignity and worth of all beings, and honoring the spark of the divine exists equally in all of us.

We all need the sort of nurturing that reinforces the recognition of our inner wisdom and ability. We are so often filled with self-doubt and questioning. So many of us have plenty of voices in our heads telling us how we are doomed or inadequate or lazy or lacking intellectually. Our own minds, it seems, hold a nearly inexhaustible list of all the reasons why we are not capable of accomplishing great things. Often, it seems, that hearing another person (a person who sees who you are, a person who loves you as you are), when that person genuinely tells you that they believe in your insight and

capabilities, it's like having someone give you a cold drink after a long, hot work day. It is so refreshing and encouraging; sometimes, the belief that another person has in us, can convey the power and strength we need to pick up and carry on again.

And, last on my incomplete list of our nurturing needs is touch. One of the great sadnesses in our current world is that the human need for contact has been so exploited that countless people have been damaged by it, and many adults are now hesitant (or forbidden by their jobs) from offering it. Yet, we all need to be touched lovingly! We're wired to long for soothing contact of some sort. We need to be generous with our safe, appropriate, exchanges of touch. Lest anyone mis-hear me, let me repeat the words SAFE and APPROPRIATE. Right contact is necessary and nurturing. Touching that is unsafe or inappropriate is far out of the realm of what I'm speaking about today. But the right kind of hugs are desperately needed in our world. It's comforting beyond words to be warmly, gently hugged by a person you know is deeply and sincerely invested in your well being. This is nurturing we all have to offer our world!

So, it seems that our need for to be cherished and cared for is vast and, it does not end when we reach 18 or 38 or 68 or 98! As it said in our Call to Gather, "...we must look on ourselves as growing children, right up to the end of our days." Every day we are alive, we have the opportunity to keep growing and to help others grow. We all need to be nurtured and we can all offer nurturing care to others. This is one of the gifts of a community like this, but it is not limited to these walls. All our spheres would be improved, I think, if we were more mindful about our roles as nurturers in this world. Regardless of our age and regardless of our gender, our faith tells us we can and should do this:

To nurture the world, we seek to know one another for who we really are.
We can recognize the pure beauty we see in one another.
We reinforce the inner wisdom, strength and capabilities we see there.
And we offer each other genuinely helpful human contact.

These are easily within our power to do – and, I believe that if we were more mindful of this, we would make a significant difference in the world.

One of the mottos you will see prominently displayed about the Fellowship is "*Nurture Your Spirit; Help Heal the World.*" Those two phrases go very much hand in hand. Attend to the nurturing you need while freely offering your own nurturing to others, and then together, we really will help heal the world.

As our opening poem said:

*There are mothers for everything, and the sea is a mother too,
whispering and whispering to us long after we have stopped listening.
I stopped and let myself lean a moment, against the blue
shoulder of the air. The work of my heart is the work of the world's heart...*

And so it is - Amen.