

The Rev. Joanne Sanders
Stanford Memorial Church
May 13, 2012

THE NATURE OF NURTURE MOTHER'S DAY

It seems right that on a day like today, Mother's Day, we have emerging themes in our scriptural texts that speak to the nature of nurture. The idea of nurture – which means to care for, to encourage growth and development, to love – in many cases creates images for those of us who have grown up with mothers, or surrogate mothers, or significant women who have modeled nurturing qualities to us throughout our lives. How many of us had mothers who sang to us? Singing comforts, sustains, nurtures, even instructs. In trying times, in good times, in sickness, in heartache, in joy we sing and are sung to.

Our psalm today that John read now exhorts us to sing a new song – a call for a new song to God implies that the old song is in some ways outmoded and inadequate. It is an invitation not to discount the old and familiar, but to sing a new song for a new setting. Hold on and see what God may yet do while we wait. Love, care, and grace are steadfast in both the promises of God and the presence of human beings. And today's gospel is clear: This is my commandment that you love one another....

The nature of nurture has something to do with growing up.

On a day like today – Mother's Day – we know that it is not only fathers who have been a part of that training. For better or for worse, it was our mothers who set the patterns for our growth. Though we're fully aware in this 21st century culture of Mr. Mom's and every permutation of parenting, motherhood and fatherhood, "the burden, fair or unfair," as one writer put it, "of growing up a child more often than not falls to mothers." Mark Twain once said: "My mother had a great deal of trouble with me, but I think she enjoyed it." And some of you have heard that favorite phrase trotted out on days like today: "God could not be everywhere, and so invented mothers."

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I also discovered this week that the nature of nurture might even suggest peace. Mother's Day has interesting roots. Not widely known, it is said to have originated in 1870 with a call to all women to unite for peace and was declared a national holiday by Congress in 1914. Julia Ward Howe is best known for having written the poem, "Battle Hymn of the Republic" but in 1870, distressed by the horror of the Civil War and fearful of a world war, she called upon women to arise - "Arise! All women who have hearts, whether your baptism be that of water or of tears!" Say firmly: "We will not have great questions answered by irrelevant agencies. Ours shall not be taken from us to unlearn all that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy and patience. We, women of one country, will be too tender to those of another country, to allow ours...to be trained to injure them. Women need no longer be made a party to proceedings, which fill the globe with grief and horror. Despite the assumptions of physical force, the mother has a sacred and commanding word to say to those who owe their lives to her suffering. That word should now be heard and answered to as never before."

In 1870, Julia Ward Howe asked for, in the name of womanhood and humanity, a general congress of women, without limit of nationality, be appointed and convene to promote the alliance of different nationalities, the amicable settlement of international questions, the great and general interests of peace. She asked for women to "now leave all that may be left of home for a great and earnest day of counsel." That is one meeting I would have loved to have been able to attend.

The nature of nurture has something to do with justice and peace.

Some of us, myself included, have been nurtured at some point in our lives by Catholic nuns. Yes they were the first feminists earning Ph.Ds. 's, managers of hospitals, schools, complex bureaucracies as well as locked away in perpetual prayer or teaching grade school kids like me. Many of you I suspect are aware that the Vatican recently issued a stinging reprimand of American nuns and ordered a bishop to oversee a makeover of the organization, the Leadership

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Conference of Women Religious, that represents 80 percent of them. (57,000 in the U.S. alone) "In effect," wrote Nicholas Kristof in his recent NY Times article, "the Vatican accused the nuns of worrying too much about the poor and not enough about abortion and gay marriage." Asks Kristof, "What Bible did that come from? The Jesus in the gospels repeatedly talks about poverty and social justice while never explicitly mentions abortion or homosexuality." And I would remind us how instructive and clear the gospel seems today: *If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love...this is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. You are my friends if you do what I command you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last....*

Kristof and many others contend that if you look at who more closely emulated Jesus's life, Pope Benedict or your average nun, it's the nuns hand down.

The good news is that they have received an outpouring of support. The National Catholic Reporter recounted that at Catholic Sunday liturgies across the nation nuns were approached with a simple question: what can we do to help? Declaration of support from the pulpit was met with loud applause and shouts filled with you go, girl! Four petition drives are under way to support nuns. One Catholic theologian, Mary E. Hunt, is developing a proposal for Catholics to redirect some contributions from local parishes to nuns. To this she challenges: "How dare they go after 57,000 dedicated women who work tirelessly for a more just world?"

Sister Joan Chittester, a prominent Benedictine nun, who coincidentally will be our Baccalaureate speaker here on campus next month on June 16, said she had worried at first that nuns spend so much time with the poor that they would have no allies. She said that the flood of support has left her breathless. It's stunningly wonderful, she said in Kristof article. You see generations of laypeople who know where the sisters are - in the streets, in the soup kitchens, anywhere where there's pain. They're with the dying, with the sick and people know it. Sister Joan spoke to Kristof from a

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ghetto in Erie PA, where her order of 120 nuns runs a soup kitchen, a huge food pantry, an afterschool program and one of the largest education programs for the unemployed in the state.

Kristof is betting on the nuns to win this one after recalling the subject of the recent viral Internet hit about African warlord Joseph Kony. One of the few heroes in this long debacle is a Comboni nun, Sister Rachele Fassera. After Kony's army attacked and kidnapped 139 students in Uganda, it was Sister Rachele who hiked through the jungle in pursuit of the kidnappers - notorious for raping and torturing their victims to death --- and browbeat the warlord in charge into releasing the vast majority of the girls.

Nicholas Kristof pointed out that Sisters may be saintly, but they're crafty. A prominent Palestinian archbishop once asked a convent if it could supply two nuns for a community literacy project. The mother superior said she would have to check with her bishop. The bishop was very clear in his refusal to allow two nuns, the mother superior replied. I cannot disobey him in that. I will send you three nuns.

I have a feeling that Julia Ward Howe, on this Mother's Day would have loved to hear these stories. And that the gospel today is a living word whose implications grow clearer as it holds the complexities of life in illuminating light. It gave nuns decades, centuries ago a vision of how to live a life that answers Christ's deepest hopes and prayers. And it still does, for nuns have triumphed over an errant hierarchy before. They are still singing a new song and always will.

The nature of nurture, yes, has something to do with justice and peace.

The nature of nurture is neither painless nor flawless.

It also has, at its core, the ability to provide some stimulus for growth and change, to sing a new song. Whether the gentle but prodding love of a mother, or the "we're so mad we can't take it any more" appeal by Julia Ward Howe to womanhood throughout the world, or

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the example of heroic, admirable and brave nuns, it forces us to look at ourselves both as we are and as we ought to be. It is often difficult, painful, embarrassing and hard, but no one ever said that growing, or growing up was easy.

Who knows, in the process of change and growth, or in movements of peace and human justice or unexplainable tragedies forced upon us, we might just be free enough to speak the truth in love. Or able to drop, as one writer put it, "our carefully constructed and maintained facades of cool disinvolvement and give vent to our feelings." In other words, learn to grow in dependence, that is, to speak our needs to each other in whatever way we best can. When I'm speaking with couples I'm about to marry here at Memorial Church (3 yesterday) or even in pastoral sessions with students, I often find at the core of anticipation, heartache, uncertainty, hope or fear of failure, is the inability to communicate with ourselves or others what we really feel, need or want. Why can't we say: I love you? I need you? I fear you? What's going on with you? or even - You drive me crazy? "These are the hardest words," said one preacher, "and because we know so many words, we use all but the right ones and nobody understands anybody."

To grow means to grow together, to lean not only on God or our faith, but to lean on each other. Perhaps here is where the best of love is put together, where we are liberated to grow in relationship to one another. *I am giving you these commands, so that you may love one another*, declares the gospel we heard today. It is no easy thing to keep and live by Christ's words, but this is the kind of growing, growing in grace, that nurtures us still and makes all other growth possible. It is the unexplainable, mysterious gift of God, source of Love divine that kindles the flames of grace and gives us the capacity to cope, to understand, to hope and to help. We have mothers of all kinds and varieties who have shown us the way.

The nature of nurture has something to do with us.

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I saw a cartoon at one point of a mother and daughter leaving a church service – the young daughter says to her mother – “my favorite part was when the preacher said...*and finally....*”

And finally, a tribute to all of you mothers, birth, surrogate, sisters, mentors, nuns and otherwise. Happy Mother’s Day. Thank you for your presence, your advocacy, your constant and deep abiding love, even when we fail to see it, know it, appreciate it. We thank you for being some of our greatest advocates, past, present and in the days to come.

You have often taught us, shown us, and still do, that while reaching inward, we endeavor to reach outward toward others and hope for a changed world, humanity, and purpose. For this we are grateful.

AND...

One more thing. Two more things actually.

If you’re able, and if it applies...

CALL YOUR MOTHER!

HUG A NUN!

Notes:

We Are All Nuns, Nicholas D. Kristof, *The New York Times*, April 28, 2012.