

SEEING CONNECTIONS

If you are honoring your mother today, may God give your words wings all day, and may God inspire your mind with the memories and messages you need to make her feel truly loved and appreciated.

If you are yourself a mother, may you hear the Holy Spirit whispering in your ear all day. May you truly receive God's offered forgiveness for whatever mistakes you believe you have made. And may you hear the Spirit thanking you for whatever love you have given, and for all the things you have done and all the ways you have cared – especially those that nobody ever noticed or understood.

In the strength of God's presence with you, may you be able to handle with grace all the other thanks and appreciation and understanding that do or do not come to you this day. And may you also thank the ONE who inspires and nurtures and provides you with the love you give to your children.

This is a good day to see connections. My own suspicion is that even when we see connections, often we do not let them sink very deeply into our awareness. There are connections of nurturing and survival, for instance, that can be tracked through hundreds, even thousands, of generations. Each one of you is the product of an unbroken line of genetic transference that traces back millions of years. Had there been a break, one slip, one failure in any generation to produce a mother that would carry this unbroken line and nurture the child that would carry it on, you would not be here! You don't think that's a miracle?!

Well, you say, it's just the natural way of things on this planet; a string of circumstances do not add up to a miracle or a meaning. Perhaps not. You, at least, have the power to stop the meaning – to fail to find it or believe in it. Your mother, with all the mothers before her, has nursed, cleaned, cooed, protected, guided, and chided you for nothing, perhaps? “A tale told to an idiot, signifying nothing.” Or more likely, a life handed to a person a little shy about claiming special meaning or importance because that carries too much weight; how can any of us live up to it, if we start thinking there is a special purpose to our lives?

Pray – make the connection – and not for your own sake, as if any of it were your design or genius. Nonetheless, realize in humility that this universe and the God who made it have gone to enormous trouble and

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expense to get you here. Do not let the meaning and purpose go unconscious on your watch, now that it is your turn. Make the connection. Find your own identity and vocation for being here. Thousands of mothers have each in their turn seen to it personally or you would not be here. Make the connection. Do not let it go for nothing.

I cannot prove it, but I have come to believe that it was one of the great sorrows of Jesus' life that He could not have a family – that He could not get married and have children. It struck me by surprise one day when I was meditating on one of the passages where Jesus is talking about children. He is passionate whenever He talks about them. There is a poignancy and emotion in the scene whenever children are present. The disciples remember being hotly chided for trying to protect Jesus from the interruption and confusion of the children. We feel the huge and flaring anger as Jesus contemplates those who tempt or harm the children: put a millstone around their neck and throw them into the sea. Even more, we feel His own connection to the children: *“He took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands upon them.”*

Jesus knew His life would be short – that it would be unkind to take a wife and start a family, only to leave them abandoned. It would have been cruel for Him to pursue a course that was so normal for others. But sometimes knowing that we cannot have something brings it even more clearly and powerfully to mind. How often have you seen that theme portrayed in stories and movies? “If I cannot have her, I want you to love her really well.” As we part company, we often say, “Take care of [so-and-so].” Someone is called inescapably to their destiny, and they leave saying, “Take good care of them for me.” So with Jesus: *“Whoever receives one child in my name receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but the one who sent me.”* Have you ever made the connection? Especially I speak to you mothers and fathers: Have you ever made the connection? Of course you love them yourselves, but you are also called to love them for Another.

The truth is, Jesus got into a pretty serious rift with His own biological family. That happens from time to time. It is actually very comforting to realize that just because you try to be a servant of God and live your life as faithfully as you can, it does not necessarily follow that you will have a pleasant family life at all times. History is full of illustrations of faithfulness putting enormous strain on family ties, and even breaking them asunder. Some of Jesus' most disturbing sayings are on this very subject: *“If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters,*

yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.” (Luke 14:26) “For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man’s foes will be those of his own household.” (Matthew 10:35-36)

The thing of it is, God outranks even your mother. The two are supposed to be a team, and the purpose of both is interconnected. Much of the time when there is a problem, it can be understood and dealt with and healed, and we go on stronger and clearer than before. But there are some times, for some of us, when loving God ends up looking like or feeling like we hate others who think they have rights over us: when trying to follow Jesus requires us to turn away from the authority others think they have over our lives. Even if we do not hate them, they say we are acting like we do.

During Jesus’ ministry, His family became convinced that He had gone off the deep end – that He was getting Himself into deeper and deeper trouble. (Mark 3:21) They set out to rescue Him – to save Him from the animosity and cruelty of people they knew had great power in their society. It was not because His family was evil; it was because they loved Him and were afraid for Him. Mary was not focusing on what God’s larger plans might be; she just didn’t want her boy to get hurt. She loved Him. In the process, Mary and Jesus’ brothers got a public rebuke and rejection that must have smarted for years. (Mark 3:31) The fact remains that Jesus’ mother and brothers and sisters did not lift a finger to help Jesus in His ministry while He was alive on earth. They had no part in it. There was no closeness between Jesus and His family through the years that He was trying to establish His mission on earth. *“A man’s foes will be those of his own household.” (Matthew 10:36) “For even his brothers did not believe in him.” (John 7:5) As Jesus Himself says: “Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother.” (Matthew 12:50)* Jesus was forced to find a new family because His own did not understand and would not help. Blood may be thicker than water, but Spirit is thicker than blood.

It makes the comment from the Cross far more poignant than people realize (John 19:26) when, as He is dying, Jesus hands His mother into the care and fellowship of His disciples. And after Jesus is dead, James (his next oldest brother) ends up head of the Jerusalem church. James is also eventually martyred for his faith; one of the books of the New Testament bears his name. And there is another book in the New Testament called “Jude”; its only reason for being there is because Jude is another of Jesus’ brothers. It is nice to know that even though there

may be a time of rift, it does not mean it is forever. But you know all these things, of course, because you read your Bibles every day, right?

The day came when Jesus had to decide whether God or His family was more important to Him. If He had decided “family,” none of you would have ever heard of Him. I hope that same decision never comes to any of you in major ways. But if it does, may you see the connection – and know what it means to follow Jesus. And may the reconciliation with your family come soon also. On the other hand, if such hard decisions do not come to us in major ways, we nevertheless know that they do come to us again and again in smaller ways. Constantly we are assuming rights over each other that belong only to God. Constantly we are having to turn from pleasing each other to our deeper commitments to God. The rifts are not great as long as we all keep remembering this. Seeing the connections can help us to celebrate Mother’s Day with joy and delight, without turning it into The National Festival for the Encouragement of Idolatry. Strengthening family life does not come by letting the family take the place of God. It comes by seeing the connections between the will of God and the ways that family life can support, sustain, and serve God’s Kingdom.

Speaking of connections, there is one other connection we might consider before moving on to our Mother’s Day celebrations. Even among Christians, there is one exceedingly important mother who gets very little praise or gratitude for all her labors and caring and nurturing. She has been at it for a lot of years now, and many owe their very lives to her, both directly and indirectly. But I know no mother in our time who is scorned more often, insulted more callously, mocked and jeered at more regularly. This despite the fact that thousands upon thousands, even millions, gain solace and comfort from her, and find their way into better lives because of her. I speak, of course, of Mother Church.

Aside from her primary task of spiritual nurture, Mother Church has spawned hospitals and universities across our land and the world. She has given birth to scouting and YMCA programs, recovery programs, and countless organizations that try to help everything from lepers to trees – many of whom have turned on her, compete with her, insult her, do everything in their power to make life hard for her, and even destroy her. And of course, as with all mothers, some children blame her for all their own problems.

Since one should not confess everybody else’s sins without confessing one’s own, I will tell you that I am ashamed that it took me so

long to acknowledge and appreciate and be thankful for the church's motherhood to me. Yet the church has been my mother for as far back as I can remember. At age four, I am told, I came home to report what I had learned in Sunday School: that we should "Love one, and another one." I'll have to exegete that text more carefully for you some other time.

Aside from all the years of Sunday School and church and all the surrounding activities of the congregation, church camp in summertime impacted my life in dramatic ways from fourth grade on. Then there was the evening when the Elders from the church came to speak to me quietly about recent misbehavior on my part, telling me that because I was a child of the church, what I did reflected on them and on the whole church. I was in fifth grade and had no idea; I had intended no harm. Two years later, they came again to say they had noticed a strange change in me – had I encountered the Holy Spirit? I was shocked they noticed me at all, never mind noticed some inward change.

But in college, at compulsory chapel, a guest preacher spoke to us of the old formula (Augustine, via Cyprian): "He cannot have God for his father who has not the church for his mother." I thought that was about the most stupid thing I had ever heard. At that point in my life, I did not know if Jesus was very important, but God was exceedingly important to me, and I certainly did not need any church between us! In fact, the church I was attending at the time seemed a complete travesty to me. Maybe a church that truly served God would be good to have around, but it did not seem to me we needed the church we had. Even if there were a few good ones here and there, this thing about "church as mother" seemed far-fetched, and irritating to boot. All my memory banks had somehow closed off. Or more likely, I had come to take the church so much for granted that I simply had no awareness of what life would have been like without her. A rather classic motherhood theme. I only wish it did not make me want to weep.

At that time, I was very "religious." But I had no connection with the church in my conscious mind. I prayed to God. I thought for myself. I lived my own life by my own code – or so I thought. With some unfortunate exceptions, I thought God was like what Jesus had revealed God to be like. But I had not yet tracked that awareness to Jesus, or thanked Him either. It had not yet dawned on me that I would have known none of it without the church, which guarded it, preserved it, taught it, and spread it – and nurtured the people who nurtured me. It had not yet dawned on me that the church was the mother who carried this faith down through history – never perfectly, but always – and often at enormous

sacrifice, whether thanked for it or hated for it. I had not yet realized that there was no other way for me to connect with the events that my faith came from. I was young and brave and independent – in other words, an ungrateful and undiscerning child.

God has punished me by sending into my life person after person who carries this same kind of attitude. I keep praying, “Look, Lord, I get it! I’m sorry. I’m really sorry. I’m doing everything I can think of to make up for it.” But he just keeps sending me more of them anyway.

The church, like many mothers, went on nurturing me despite my ingratitude and being undeserving. People kept coming into my life when I most needed them. They were all products of the church: friends, wife, teachers, spiritual mentors – the list is far too long to mention. I found books that moved and thrilled me, but I did not notice that they were written by people of the church. Nor did I stop to realize that all the concepts and visions and purposes that motivated and inspired me were being carried, for the most part, by the church.

Then one year, Jesus clicked in. He had always been there, of course, but now it was clear to me how essential He was to it all, and it was hard to comprehend how I had missed it for so long. Yet still, for years I worked “for the church,” so to speak, and had no great love for her. It was for God and for Jesus, at least in my mind. It still is, of course.

Then one year, my own life fell apart. It had been coming for a long time, but you know how it is: It is easier to see other things and blame other things until it’s too late. Besides, nothing like that could ever happen to me – I am immune. So I ended up in the alcohol ward at Cabrini Hospital in Seattle. It was two or three days later that I began to connect alcohol with any of my real problems.

When I came out of the hospital, do you know who was there for me? I assumed my career was over. I had preached about grace and forgiveness and compassion for other people, and I believed it to be true for other people. But I did not believe it for me, at least not in this world. Certainly I did not expect it from the church. After all, I knew the church pretty well, I thought. God was there for me, and Jesus never abandoned me. Yet the mother who had always been there, she was there too. She nursed me back to health. She never told me I was worthless just because I had problems. She kept reassuring me. And perhaps most important of all, she kept giving me work to do – almost as if she believed that I could still be useful.

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It's a funny thing, but somehow that experience unlocked all the other memory banks. I began to realize how much the church had been my mother all along. And without her, all the things I lived for and cared about and believed in, well, there was no way to do anything about them – and no way to BE about them – without her, the church. It had always been true; I just had not noticed. And I had never said “thank you” to the Mother of Faith – the nurturer and preserver of the Christian Life on earth.

The simple truth is that the church is Christ's body on earth. It has endless flaws, and I know that probably better than anybody else here. But I have a great and urgent longing for this mother to be mother and nurturer and caregiver and light and inspiration to other people coming through this world – like she has been to me. And any of you who have a glimmer of any of this, I hope you are going to help make *this* church strong for her task, in this place, in our time.

In any case, it's Mother's Day. And if you make the connections, one of the mothers you might want to say “thank you” to, at least in your prayers before the day is through, is Mother Church.