

## THE RESURGENCE OF NURTURE

The Scripture passage we read this morning is wonderful. It is wonderful because it is plain and down-to-earth. It speaks of the Christian Life and Faith in such a natural way that we know it really is the mindset, the focus, and the way Paul and his friends actually think. It speaks of Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit; of the Resurrection, and Heaven; of the ministry and mission that such convictions bring to any person who comes to believe such things. Paul is not trying to instruct; he is not trying to persuade anybody. The church at Thessalonica already believes these things. Paul is telling the Thessalonians that he loves them and cares about them. The love of God in Christ Jesus – and all that it implies – is the ground and center, the foundation on which it all stands. Nevertheless, these people have come to care about each other. They have a life together. They live for the promised future, but you cannot do that without tasting some of what that future is about even here and now. So the caring, the nurture, the personal bonds of affection and love shine through.

*“We were gentle among you, like a nurse taking care of her children.... You have become very dear to us.”* I hope you know that I don’t read such passages with some kind of feeling that I live up to what they are saying, just because I get to read them. On the contrary, it reminds me of all the ways we have to look past and get past this “earthen vessel” to keep getting to Jesus’ real grace and love. Somebody referred to me the other day as “gruff.” You probably think that should not surprise me, but it surprised me. I have been shot at for so many years that it doesn’t surprise me to be called “crusty.” I have also been loved so well for so many years that it is not really very hard to get through the crust. But “gruff”?

Some remark I made the other day caused a stranger to accuse me of not having enough “tough love.” The merriment this caused among my friends was, I thought, overdone. I was born a nurturer and all my life I have cared about people, and my worst errors have been on the side of putting up with too much for too long. Some people term it “people-pleasing.” So, trying to correct for that, I am now “gruff”?

Well, one thing about the passage really is true for me also: *“You have become very dear to me.”* I don’t really want you focused on

that, though. I want you focused on Jesus Christ, to whom you are far more dear. And Jesus keeps straightening us out, with wisdom and with power and by example – even about love. The WAY of love is not easy. Because there is such tenderness in love, we think its road will lead us into pastel-shaded landscapes. Love does beget love, as Christ’s love proves by drawing even the likes of us. But love also begets jealousy, anger, and even hatred. There is no love in the world that does not widen our spectrum of pain. There is no love in the world that does not cause us to look for greater strength, so that we may endure it. There is no love in the world that does not make us more vulnerable. And all psycho-babble aside, if you do not know some power greater than yourself, this vulnerability will destroy you. Are we talking about Mother’s Day yet?

Back in the ’70s and ’80s, it became popular to act like we were discovering for the very first time that God was a nurturer – that God was not only Father, but Mother as well. We were also enamored of men being more like women, and women being more like men. It became a really big deal for men to learn how to cry; for men to talk about their feelings; for men to “get in touch” with their feminine side. Meanwhile, of course, we were spending a lot of time and ink trying to picture women more like men, and God more like a woman. None of this confusion was nearly as new to our world as many of us wanted to think. Actually, the ancients always knew that God was beyond gender. “God is holy” – and “holy” means “different”: beyond anything we can comprehend. *“Make no images of God.”* That is one of the Ten Commandments, by the way, for those of you who believe in them but have no idea what they say.

So if the men switch to the women’s side, and the women switch to the men’s side, and God goes to the women’s side – isn’t God still with the men? Never mind. Like with most revolutions, you get a lot of upheaval, and everything is turned upside down. But when the dust finally clears, what comes clear is that nothing has really changed. A picture turned upside down is still the same picture. No transcendence, no conversion, no real breakthrough.

I do not believe that the dust ever finally clears in this world. But what happened in our own recent gender revolution is that the structures of nurture got pretty confused – and in many places, badly weakened. It seems to me that one of the best things to come out of this turmoil has been an awakening on the part of many men to their role as parent. I think more men are spending more time in more ways

with their children today than has been true since the coming of the Industrial Revolution. This has been countermanded, in part, by women spending more and more time out of the nurturing role. But that is beginning to change in many places too. We are actually seeing a resurgence of nurture – actually seeing families where both parents care about and are involved with the lives of their children. Oh, it is far from universal or perfect, to be sure. But far better than we expected – far better than what was predicted. When I studied sociology in the late 1950s, it was predicted that by the 1980s there would be no marriages – no families as we thought of them back then. Children would be raised in community cooperatives. Well, a lot of it came true, but not quite in the pattern predicted. We still have married love, and we even have families where the roles of male and female – father and mother, husband and wife – are acknowledged and claimed on purpose again. Who could have imagined *that* in the '70s?

As an aside, I am still annoyed when, every time a man shows tenderness, caring, or understanding, it is referred to as his “feminine side.” Talk about sexist! No man can care as a man? No woman can be aggressive without calling on some secret little man she has buried inside her? Someday we will figure out that a man can care and nurture without turning into a woman, and that a woman can go into battle without turning into a man. But I will probably be long dead before it comes to light.

But Mother’s Day is coming back. For a while there, only Rip Van Winkle could celebrate Mother’s Day with a straight face. Mother’s Day became a time to be angry because you didn’t get a better mother. For many people, it was a time to meditate on all the ways they were not supported, nurtured, understood, protected, or cherished. But it turned out that even this started to reveal to us how much we needed our mothers.

Is there a resurgence of nurture in our time? Is the importance of Motherhood coming back? I think so. Not everywhere or all at once, of course. We never do it as well as we should, or even as well as we wish. But we have always known that it was crucial. We have always known that without it, all is lost. And not everybody would agree, but even in some of the ages of greatest male domination, the real purpose was to provide a safe place for the women to nurture. In any case, Paul’s opening remarks to his Christian friends at Thessalonica are full of tenderness and caring. And it will possibly not move you as much as it does me, but in Exodus, God tells Moses to speak to

Pharaoh: *“Then tell Pharaoh that these are the words of the Lord: Israel is my firstborn son. I tell you, let my son go to worship me. Should you refuse to let him go, I shall kill your firstborn son.”*  
(Exodus 4:22-23) From the dawn of our religion, God is Parent.

It is not about rules. It is not about ethics. It is about the love of a father for his child: “You have my son. I want him back. I have tried to be reasonable. Now I will do whatever I have to do to get my son back.” It has always been about nurture. It has always been about the love of the parent for the child. It has always been about relationship. If I do not tell you, you will tell me – and we need to keep telling each other: It is about nurture. There is no strength where there is no love. We do all kinds of things, and rightly so, to keep things going and to keep things running as well as possible in the outer world. But if the families are not strong, it cannot come to anything. If the children are not nurtured, they will be warped and weak and insecure. Charity begins at home (“charity” was the old King James word for love, if you remember). Charity begins at home because there is no other place for it to have the patient, disciplined, consistent impact it needs to do its work. Most of us have to go back and fill in the blanks when we get old enough to trade in our imperfect earthly parents for the true God. But the less nurture we got when we were young, the harder that is.

Motherhood is coming back. Many women are realizing that there is a feminine power that is far more precious and influential and important than trying to mimic male power. We would never have had the feminist revolution if so many men had not abused or abandoned their male roles. And I don’t mean to suggest or imply that such problems are over or ever will be, from either side of the gender roles. But among the aware and caring across the land, I think there is great reason for joy, appreciation, and celebration for all the very conscientious and intentional parenting going on in our time. In our own church community, the amount of loving and caring parenting going on is incredible.

On this Mother’s Day, I hope you mothers in particular are feeling greatly appreciated, valued, supported, and cherished. It would be satisfying, I think, to do an old-fashioned three-point sermon from this passage and relate it to motherhood: your work of faith, your labor of love, your steadfastness of hope. I can hear it ringing, but I am not going to do that today.

It would be fun to talk about the church as mother – mother of a faith community. It is important to do that because so often the church is seen as the end product – the end purpose – of conversion, of becoming a Christian. Motherhood is never really about mother. A mother is preparing her child for its own life: to fall in love and live with another; to be strong enough to survive and accomplish in the world beyond the home; even to live and be happy and true when the mother can no longer be there; and yes, in time, to be strong enough to create a new home that will do the same things for those as yet unborn.

In the same way, the church is never about itself either. It is preparing its members for their own lives – helping them to find their identity and their vocatio. It wants them to fall in love and live with Jesus – with His Holy Spirit – even more than it wants to keep their love for itself. It wants them to be strong enough to survive and accomplish in the world without losing their values or turning from their allegiance to Christ. It wants them to live and be happy, even if they must move away or if the church they grew up in gets old and dies. And yes, they must be strong enough – when necessary – to create, to renew, or to help build up new churches that will go on doing these things for those as yet unborn.

We are this kind of church. Yet we still have a long way to go. I do not *know* if it is time, but I *think* it is time for us to take a bold new step. It will test and challenge us considerably, if we decide to go for it. It will force us, yet again, to rethink our priorities. I will personally hate it about every fifth day, and I will make up for that in gratitude the four days in between. It is called LOGOS. It will need the participation of most of us and the support of the rest of us – and I don't mean money.

LOGOS is a community-building, Christ-centered, prayer-based, well-balanced, broadly tested conglomerate of crazy, wild fun – mixed together with serious Bible study and worship. It is a mid-week program involving parents, kids from as young as we dare up through high school, and everybody else in the church who is willing to help. LOGOS rests on the premise that the single most important thing you can give to a child is a personal relationship with God. The culture all around us has no idea that this is true. The schools have no idea that this is true – and even if they did, they would not be allowed to mention it. If WE do not know it or if we know it but do nothing about it, then our children will either miss the most important thing in life or

they will have to get it from others. And the fact is – not the opinion or guess or assumption, but the *fact* is – a child who does not establish a relationship with Christ and His church by the time they reach twenty years of age has only a five-percent chance of ever finding it.

Talk about fiddling while Rome burns. Oops. I better not use that image or you will think I'm talking about hellfire. Not at all. I just want our kids to know Jesus on this side too. It is hard here. They need to know where the strength, love, guidance, and power really are. We give them every advantage we can. Piano lessons – hey, where would we be if somebody had not done that for Rodger?! Math. Reading. Soccer. It's all wonderful. But Jesus is more important than all the rest – more crucial than all the rest put together. Yet for endless numbers of children – even in the church – Jesus is coming in toward the end, next to last on the list of things we try to provide for our children.

Some of you have heard rumors that I don't really care about the kids. Some of you have even helped to spread those rumors. For over three years, we have been working together to build this church back up from some difficult times. One area at a time, one step at a time, we have been repairing damage, getting patterns back in place, getting our purpose and our faith clearer and stronger. You have been wonderful! There is always a little flak; we cannot do much work without making a little dust. But you have been wonderful! LOGOS or no LOGOS, we are on the move, and much is happening. A little of the dust, though – a little of the flak – has been around Confirmation. More accurately, around the absence of a Confirmation Class. Despite what you may have heard and despite my schedule, I have *always* been willing to teach a Confirmation Class if we would come up with three or more kids over the age of twelve who were willing to do it with me. The last time I had a Confirmation Class of only three, all three were young women. It lasted over a year and then turned into a three-person Bible Study group (plus me of course) that lasted until they all went off to college. Two became ministers, the third a missionary. They were unusual. They had an unusual teacher. All three had Scorpio Moons. God help the men in their lives ... to be worthy. I miss them. But I don't try to hang on to anybody. It is not about me. It is about the God who reveals himself in Jesus Christ.

But what usually happens? We gather young high school kids – sometimes even junior-highers – into a Confirmation Class. Even a well-designed course that goes for nine months barely scratches the surface for most kids unless they have a really strong background

from both home and church school. There is considerable peer pressure to “join the church” as a conclusion to the process. Even if the kids enjoy the class a lot, it has little connection, in their minds, with the life of the church itself. So they get confirmed, join the church, and most of the time that is the last we ever see of them. This has been happening across the land, in thousands of churches, for over forty years. Doesn’t anybody ever learn?

Do you know how we make a vaccine? We take a little bit of the disease, mix it in a serum, then inject it into the system so the system can deal with it, get used to it, and become *immune* to catching the disease in full strength. Confirmation is the church’s version of vaccination. We vaccinate our kids against ever catching the real Christian Faith. A tiny little bit, out of context, then it’s over.

LOGOS ends that pattern. It keeps putting so much of the disease out there that folk of all ages catch it full-strength and then keep infecting each other. Then Confirmation becomes an added dimension, a lot more fun, and a bigger dose – *more* of what is already known: God is not really boring. Christianity is the most exciting life in the world. The only people bored by it have gotten such a tiny piece of it that they have never felt any of the real transformation or allegiance or power.

Picture, if you will, a young man or woman in college, maybe eighteen or nineteen years of age. All around them are drugs, sex, drinking, goofing around; people flunking out; people doing a total superiority trip – that is, get the grades, life is about success and winning over others. And from classroom to bull-session, from one end of the day to the other, there is every imaginable kind of value system, style, philosophy, purpose, approach, temptation, opportunity.

But *this* young man or woman, whatever else happens, whatever else is going on, each day reads their Bible, prays, checks in with the Holy Spirit – not just saying some memorized words, but asking the Spirit for help and guidance, and not just with the big stuff, like career choice or is this the one to marry, but with all the little details of everyday pressure and choices as well. (By the way, do you know how many people get married and never even ask if the Holy Spirit approves of their union?)

By college days, we have lost any chance to protect or control our children. We can no longer make sure they keep our standards,

do things our way, or even head toward our ideals or goals. But in this case – with the young man or woman we are picturing – neither can anybody *else* control them! Only the Higher Power, the True Parent – the living, all-wise, truly loving Christ of God. *That* is who they are tuned to. Can you imagine a greater protection, a greater Guide, a better chance for this person to find authentic purpose, true identity, meaningful relationships, strength, and the hope to see it all through? Is this maybe as important, even, as playing soccer? I know soccer can build character, and even friendship. I doubt if it is the Source of either.

A connection – a relationship – with God is the most important thing of all. We cannot give it. But with God’s help, we can provide the context, the community, and the setting that give our children their best chance to find it – to get started in their own relationship with the Christ of God. And the magic is that in doing this, *we* also find it truer, experience it more, and find new dimensions of it for our own lives.

I hope you believe in motherhood. I hope you also believe in the motherhood of the church. LOGOS cannot happen because the minister says so, and not even because the boards and committees decide we should do it. LOGOS can only happen when a large percentage of us becomes flat-out unwilling to have our children miss this dimension of life. All I want or need is for you to pay attention as the information about LOGOS comes out in the next few months. Pay attention to the information and listen for the Spirit’s call. If and when enough of us hear and respond to that call, we will go for it together.