

Making room for the Child

Mother's Day, May 14th, 2006

The Community Church of Chapel Hill

Patty Hanneman, Intern Minister

Reading

We come together today in praise and thanksgiving
For the gift of life itself.
Someone gave birth to us and some of us have given birth.
All of us have been mothered in our time,
All of us have been mothered.
Let our time today be one of recognition –
That we arrive from so many places,
Joy and delight,
Wistfulness and longing and worry,
Unmet needs and unfulfilled dreams,
Loss and sorrow, loss and emptiness,
Loss and regret.

All that life is made of, mothers are made of too.
Today we sing the songs of so many,
Mothers who are single parents, foster parents,
Mothers who relinquished their young out of necessity.
Mothers who found their heart in adoption,
Mothers who left their children in a thousand ways,
Mothers who rejoice and mothers who mourn.

We sing the songs of the grandmother, the auntie, the classroom teacher, the Sunday
School teacher, the babysitter, the neighbor with endless cookies and time.

There is a kind of love we cannot live without.
It is never too late, no matter our age or our situation.
We sing a song of gratitude for all the moments of being known,
Being cherished, being found.

Mary Harrington

Sermon

On Mother's Day, many of us want and expect to hear some talk about the wonder and glory of motherhood. While I can tell you from personal experience that we mother's appreciate being appreciated, I can also tell you that a rosy, romanticized view of motherhood has little to do with my experience of being a mother.

I was one of the last in my generation of the family to have children. I thought I knew an awful lot about parenting from critiquing my sisters-in-law until I actually had children. I loved being pregnant. I remember feeling beautiful, and happy, and, well, ripe, like there was this promise, this hopefulness, growing inside me. I was a receptacle for a miracle. A sometimes sick and very tired receptacle, but when you're co-creating a miracle you can sweat the small stuff. When the baby moved, when I could watch his heel or his fist roll across my tummy, I knew there was an individual person in there. And yet his very existence depended on mine. It gave me a strange sense of power, of being in control, yet an instrument of the Source of Life, my own body causing this miracle to happen. It was the only time in my life that I ever had the chance to romanticize motherhood. Because then the baby came. I was about to find out what true humility was all about.

Because this baby, who had been such a quiet, darling little thing in the hospital suddenly morphed into this demanding, crying individual when we brought him home. And my previous feelings of being a sure-footed, wise, powerful, miracle-making woman gave way to being a confused, sad, scared, ignorant new mom. I remember calling the birthing center for advice on how to handle a colicky baby, and in desperation only half-jokingly asking if they had any kind of return policy on these little guys.

Sometimes we have to really get to that place of darkness and fear before we have enough humility to seriously reach out, and when I got to that point, when I started to really wonder if I could do this motherhood thing, I finally called my mother-in-law – the woman whose daughters I’d been critiquing all those years. She said simply, “You’ve got to make room for that child.” It was a phrase I was to hear several times over the next few years, it became a touchstone phrase that meant whatever I needed to remember about how to be a parent. I still hear that phrase inside my head whenever I find myself in a situation where my own ego stands in the way of good sense, stands in the way of paying attention to what is really needed. What Irma was saying, and what this baby began to teach me is that there are some things in life that demand, and are worth, attention outside myself. Demanding that for a time it become the center of our lives, loosening the significance of our own egos.

“Making room for the child” also meant surrendering control. It meant allowing a space within which you can hold the knowledge of being totally responsible for something, and accepting that responsibility, yet not having control over the outcome. It meant creating an environment in which I accepted the burden of care and concern without knowing what sort of individual my child would be.

Charles Hartshorne, a process theologian, says that we bless the world, not through the outcome of our actions, but through the loving intentions and actions that we bring to the world in our everyday lives. Everything we do matters even though the outcome is out of our hands.

This whole dynamic of taking responsibility, yet surrendering control is one of the most difficult tensions to negotiate. It’s a spiritual discipline, it’s implications extend

past parenthood – there are all sorts of birthings in our lives, but I don't think there's a any better place to learn and practice this dynamic than in intimate relationships, parenting being one of the most intimate. It takes a strong, healthy ego in order to do it well. And this was a very hard lesson for me to learn. A few years ago I would have bristled at hearing anyone talking about the need to surrender to anything. A feminist critique might emphasize that for women, the issue is rarely the need to surrender, but rather to stand our ground. But what I've discovered since then is this – that surrender of control has to come from a place of having a strong, healthy ego system. Surrendering control with a healthy ego system to me means accepting reality, such as it is, so that one is not caught in the false belief that one's actions don't matter, or that things will change on their own. It does not mean surrendering to or staying in an unhealthy situation. It doesn't mean being a victim of circumstance.

“Making room for the child” means being nimble enough to shift focus – from outside blame, to inside, taking responsibility for our own actions and reactions, and then finally out again, truly surrendering the outcome to the Universe. When I've been able to do this, it has been a truly freeing, transforming experience. And it feels very different from the sacrificing, ever-suffering mother we sometimes romanticize.

When I can do this well, when I can create this kind of emotional space, and believe me, it's much more rarely than I would like to admit - and I would guess if you were to ask my kids they'd have a hard time seeing me in this sermon at all - it allows me to see myself as an imperfect human being, and sometimes even a foolish human being, which is in fact the only place from which we can be transformed or changed. When my kids were teenagers, making room for the child meant realizing that I was being replaced

by a new generation that had more energy and more savvy to deal with the world they were growing into than I could ever have. And that meant that we were both wise in our own ways, because some life lessons take years to learn and others require that we be part of the new age dawning, so that the best way to figure out how to negotiate this new world was for us to listen to one another. But Teenagers also know they don't have all the answers, they know they are flawed people, they know they'll soon have to go out into the world and survive as adults, and they're looking for evidence that a flawed life can be lived well. So it helps to develop a sense of humor about being both foolish and wise, and never knowing how you're going to be seen on any given day.

I remember one year, when my daughter Kellie was about 15, she decided she wanted to march in the Pride parade with me. And I was feeling proud of her and good about myself for raising a daughter who could be so open and affirming to diversity. I was in wise parent mode. We lined up right behind the drag queens sitting on the hood of their convertible and she didn't seem to be embarrassed by it at all. And then she turned to me and said, "Mom, I am not going to march with you if you wear those sunglasses; they make you look like a huge overgrown insect!"

Making room for the child is not easy, nor can it be done consistently, and some learn these lessons better than others. Which means that for many of us, memories of our mothers are complicated, and we celebrate this day with mixed emotions. Perhaps we remember women who were not able to rise to the challenges of parenting as we would have wanted or needed, taking responsibility enough, caring enough, giving up control enough. May we find healing and maybe even forgiveness for all the ways in which our mothers fell short of fulfilling the love that gave us birth. If our mothers have died, may

we take time to cherish our memories of them, mixed as they may be. And may each of us celebrate and reflect on all those who have mothered us well. The women in our lives who have shown their love for us, whether through mothering or mentoring. Those tough, gentle, truth-telling, loving, wise, whimsical, imperfect women, who have served as our teachers, mentors, guides and friends. May we find ways to thank them for blessing our lives with their presence.