

“The Unity of God”

Psalm 148; John 10:22-30

May 8, 2022

It was this past year that I learned something interesting. The woman who first came up with and advocated for Mother’s Day, came to detest it. The reason – it’d become too commercial. Every flower and card and chocolate company were using this special day to hawk their goods and it disturbed the woman who first came up with the idea and sold the President on making it a national holiday. Moms, just like that one, want the best for people, it’s wired into their nature.

2nd Timothy is especially touching to me. It is because it’s written as Paul lives under the shadow of his impending demise. You see, Paul knew, shackled in Roman chains, that his end was near. In those precious moments prior to his crucifixion, Paul writes to his junior brother in Christ, Timothy. It’s clear that, in this letter, Paul hopes to convince Timothy to continue fighting the good fight and keeping the faith. Knowing it’s likely to be the last one sent, Paul breaks out all the fireworks required to give his letter maximum impact.

Often lost in our reading of the Bible is just what an amazingly persuasive writer Paul, by means of the Holy Spirit, was. And here, in this one, as he aims to keep Timothy on the right track until they too gather again in the Coming Kingdom, he uses some great strategy, right in the opening. Listen and hear if you can understand what I’m talking about. *“Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus, by the will of God according to the promise of the life that is in Christ Jesus, to Timothy, my beloved child: Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. I thank God whom I serve, as did my ancestors, with a clear conscience, as I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. As I remember your tears, I long to see you, that I may be filled with joy. I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother, Lois, and your mother, Eunice, and now, I am sure, dwells in you as well. For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands, for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control. Therefore, do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me His prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God, who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of His own purpose and grace, which He gave us in Christ Jesus, before the ages began, and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.”* Like I said, Paul was bringing out all his best ammo to make an impact so, right at the very beginning, do you see what he did there? He points Timothy back to his mother and his grandmother’s faith.

Now, like most of us who’ve been blessed with really good mothers, this is a fine place to start, isn’t it? I mean, after all, if someone really wants to motivate you, sometimes they’ll say things like “C’mon, make your mama proud” or, when rebuking you, someone might say “Did your mom really raise you like that?” Invoking our mothers is weighty stuff because, as many of us know, our mothers represent for us our earliest exposure to provision, protection and forgiveness and the best Mothers do so all in a humble and self-sacrificing manner. In a whole lot of ways, the love of God in Christ becomes more understandable as we witness the love of our mothers. Now that isn’t to make the claim that God can be reduced entirely to the roles and functions of a mother. Nor are mothers perfect, although our own may be close to it. *At the same time, I think you’ll agree that in some regards, the love of God is more comprehensible in light of good mothering.*

The significance of having a good mother came into sharp relief as the women of a church I once served listened to one of the inmates who’d been through Kairos while he was incarcerated. Jimmy talked about growing up without a mother. You see, the streets had claimed the life of his mother while Jimmy was still in diapers. He remarked how difficult it was to understand love without a loving mother. Like when people were trying to do good things for him, he was suspicious, not accepting. Jimmy linked that all to the lack of a functioning mother. And so, I do recognize that not every one of us has had a good mother. But, the words of Scripture assure us, we ALL have a good and wonderful God. This morning I’m going to talk about that great God by using mothers as a window into His divine and Holy goodness.

To begin with – Mothers are COMFORTING. From the very first moments of life when little babies are thrust upon their mothers to the scurrying of mom’s feet carrying band-aids, Bactine and Neosporin the moment we skinned our knees, we human beings just find natural comfort in our mother’s arms. Who among us can’t explicitly remember some occasion when fear or insecurity seized us by the throat that somehow our moms

were able to alleviate? Maybe it comes as we walk off the ball field after a difficult loss. There's mom reminding us that there will be another game, another day. Perhaps following heartbreak we've turned to our mothers with tears in our eyes. "There are millions of fish the sea" she assures us. Coming from anyone else such words would be nauseating, but from our mothers, it rings with absolute truth. Maybe, filled with sickness or with sorrow we've sought out our mothers for the kind of comfort that only they seem to be able to provide us. Mothers have that kind of amazing ability as a gift from God. And it's only fitting as God himself offers us profound comfort. Like a kind of steadying drumbeat in the Scriptures, God says from Old Testament through New *"do not fear, for I am with you."* In fact, a frequent image the Bible employs for God, as well as His Son, is that of a mother bird, sheltering her chicks under her wings. Of course, that means the full weight of the present storm is felt not by the babies, but by their mothers. In the book of Ruth, as Boaz praises Naomi for her dedication to, of all people, her mother-in-law, he uses these words: *"The Lord repays you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge!"*

In God, we find COMFORT, refuge from the worst. As I said, a lot of us first experienced the analogue by which we comprehend God's love through the protective care of our mothers. We see this comfort personified in the person of Jesus Christ as he speaks to us those words that take root in our souls providing hope amid sorrow, rest among toil, peace even within the fury of a storm. Jesus says – *"Come to Me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ...for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."*

We have a GOD WHO PROTECTS US THROUGH WISDOM! On top of being the source of great comfort, mothers also occupy an important *teaching* role. That I can eat with a fork or know how to set a table is the direct result of my mother's instruction. Think of the great many lessons you've learned from your mother. Most of those lessons come rather painlessly. Others come as what I like to call "experiential learning opportunities."

One time, when I was young, I made the mistake of having a temper tantrum at Belk's. I don't really remember why, I think it was because I was bored but, anyway, I determined to fuss and carry on. In trying to elude my mom's grasp, I ran under one of the circular racks, essentially getting out of her reach. Mom let me know, in UNCERTAIN terms, what was going to happen to me if I didn't come out of there, right that second. Needless to say, since you're seeing me here, I did EXACTLY what she suggested. Proverbs 31 suggests that a virtuous woman, *"...looks well to the ways of her household..."* and this is surely one of the ways that moms protect us – they keep us from making fools of ourselves. You see, mothers don't tolerate everything we do with a wink and a smile. They're going to forgive them, but their aim is to raise children that are able to function well in this world. Its mothers who've taught us to behave, sometimes easily, sometimes not so as we've been rebuked for poor behavior.

In fact, preparing for this sermon, I looked closely at Proverbs 31. There, I found it interesting to note that the signs of a virtuous woman begin with her telling her son not to drink too much and get involved to heavily with the ladies. For a great many of us, it was our mother's insistence that we come to church that's led us deeper and deeper into a life of faith. Mothers, knowing what's best for us, know that nothing is better for us than a life-long relationship with the Lord our God. So, they bring us, sometimes dragging us, to church. I wonder if it was like that for Timothy. I'm not kidding, I'm only a pastor because my mom kept nagging, I mean, urging me to come to church. Finally, one day, I acquiesced to her constant reminders. It was a dark time and I'm so grateful God led me in that direction. My whole life changed, no kidding. Then, when I felt I was ready, I got baptized. There, around me were 20 women all aged 65 or beyond smiling. I didn't know a single one of them. OH, but they knew me. Turned out, Mom had them all praying that one day I'd show up to church. I'm happy to report I stand in good company on that.

Augustine credits his mother with bringing him out of the darkness of philosophy and hedonism into the sheepfold. So too does another 4th century theologian, Gregory of Nyssa. These two men are responsible for much of our theology. Much of it traces its roots to these two guys and so when we hail the Trinity today, in some real way, we remember the Spirit working through Augustine's and Gregory's mother. Mothers teach the faith that was originally taught to all humanity by no other than Jesus Christ. As the Word took on Flesh and dwelt among us, He spent a great portion of His days teaching His disciples about the Kingdom of God. Along

with that came rules, ethics, morality...good behavior. And Jesus, much like many of our moms, wasn't afraid to rebuke the disciples when they were in error. Who can forget Jesus' alarming words, "*Get behind thee Satan!*" as Peter strayed from the right and narrow?

In all that they do, *good mothers are COMPASSIONATE*. I'll never forget one time, when little Benjamin was sick with some ailment, coming into a room and seeing Natalie teary-eyed. She was terribly saddened by how bad little Ben was feeling. In seeing her, I remembered seeing a similar look on my mom's face as she cared for myself or my sister when we were ill. So too have I seen similar looks of the faces of the mothers of this congregation as their children, young and old, have undergone suffering of any variety whatsoever. Webster's dictionary defines compassion as "*a sympathetic consciousness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it.*" Good mothers are naturally compassionate as I've said and it's understandable as we all share a wonderfully compassionate God.

In the book of Isaiah, God speaks through the prophet saying "*For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the LORD, who has compassion on you.*" God's compassion for us flows right through as a natural extension of His love for us. We are, according to the words of Scripture, His creation. His children. Just as a mother has compassion with her children, her creation, so too does God have compassion on us all, HIS CREATIONS.

Jesus Christ, as the son of God, showed this in His earthly life. Seeing the "harassed and the helpless" Jesus had compassion on the people because they were like sheep without a shepherd. Seeing the sick, Jesus' compassion led to healings. Seeing the blind, Jesus' compassion led to restored eyesight.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus happens upon a funeral procession in Nain. "*Soon afterward He went to a town called Nain, and His disciples and a great crowd went with Him. As He drew near to the gate of the town, behold, a man who had died was being carried out, the only son of His mother, and she was a widow, and a considerable crowd from the town was with her. And when the Lord saw her, He had compassion on her and said to her, 'Do not weep.' Then He came up and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And He said, 'Young man, I say to you, arise.' And the dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. Fear seized them all, and they glorified God, saying, 'A great prophet has arisen among us!' and 'God has visited His people!'"*

In addition to their compassion, Mothers are FORGIVING. I personally thank the Lord for that. Now, can you even imagine what it would be like if your mom remembered ALL your transgressions. Chances are they do. Once, when I was a kid, I got to running around the house, chasing my older sister. I don't really remember why I was chasing her but one thing was for certain, running in the house was not allowed. But there I was, doing it anyway. Well, you can probably see where this story is going, right? Well, I ran behind a piano and caught my foot on the cord of a Waterford crystal lamp which, if it wasn't my mom's most treasured possession, it was close. The lamp tumbled over to the hardwood floor and shattered into about 7 or 8 big pieces. Now, Mom being out of the house when this happened gave me a lot of time to think so I tried to fix the lamp. With Elmer's glue. It didn't go well, let me just tell you. Elmer's glue and fine crystal aren't a match made in heaven, that's for sure. I knew I was in BIG, BIG trouble. I was convinced that I may never see the outside of my room ever again. Eventually though, my mom came back into my room. My mom simply asked me if I knew that what I'd done was wrong. "Yes" I replied meekly. She then said "It's okay. You know it was wrong now. *I forgive you.*" I mentioned it the other day. Now, it's been a lot of years but my mom? She doesn't remember this. I can't help but think of God in Jeremiah where He declares, "*I will remember their sins no longer.*" Here I was, deserving of the most severe punishment a little child could receive and my mother's love opened up an unexpected avenue. Forgiveness in the face of great transgression.

Throughout the entirety of Scripture, God is amazingly forgiving. Adam and Eve partake of forbidden fruit, God forgives them. Noah steps off the ark and no sooner does he put out the fire he's lit to celebrate God, he plants a vineyard and proceeds to get stinking drunk. God forgives him. Moses kills a man. Forgiven. David takes another man's wife. Forgiven. Peter denies Christ. Forgiven. Paul oppresses Christians. Forgiven. We stray choosing to follow our idolatrous schemes instead of God's will for us. Through the Cross of Jesus Christ we know that we too are forgiven and that, if we're to hear God's words, our transgressions are FORGOTTEN by a God who is also omnipotent.

Hear these words from Isaiah 43: "*...you have burdened Me with your sins; you have wearied Me with your*

iniquities. Yet 'I, I am He who blots out your transgressions for My own sake, and I will not remember your sins.'” Through Jesus Christ, God forgets your transgressions as they’ve already been forgiven!

Mothers are not only forgiving, but they’re also *self-sacrificing*. Good mothers have wired into them an ease with self-sacrifice. Somehow, somehow, it seems like good mothers are always setting aside their concerns, their interests, their ambitions for their children. I’ve seen Natalie washing bottles and boiling binkies late into the night when I know she was tired and would rather be doing something else. I see the mothers within this congregation sacrifice their time and energy and sleep in order to make sure their kids get to where they needed to be. They’ve undertaken volunteer duties at schools, at daycares, for sports leagues and here at church in order to provide their children with opportunities.

But it extends beyond that, truth be told. When I think back, I realize that SOME, not all, BUT SOME, of those male stereotypes are sort of true. Like, I’ll do something for the family and then, like, IMMEDIATELY call attention to it. One time, I was doing so and Natalie, bless her, had had enough. This was a day where she’d begun at the crack of dawn doing laundry, then worked 9 hours, driven home to be greeted by my boast. To which she lovingly replied – “Do you want a medal for taking back in the trash can?”

It isn’t just that mothers are self-sacrificial, they’re *humble* about it as well. God demonstrates that His very nature is humble. Just imagine if God were somehow like us these days. Ever petal on every blossoming flower would be heralded by social media posts, right? Thankfully, God isn’t like that.

And, of course, we know, God is eternally self-sacrificial. We know this because of Jesus Christ. For in the fullness of time, God took on human flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. But in order to enact that salvation, something more was required than simply having God become human. This Jesus, this perfect man, this perfect God sacrificed Himself for the salvation of all of our souls. Jesus laid down His life in order to grant us eternal life. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says *“very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”* Again, He says *“I am the good Shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”*

Comforting, teaching, compassionate, forgiving, self-sacrificing...good Mothers are indeed a blessing from God. A God who Himself comforts, teaches, holds compassion, forgives and sacrifices. We are, most assuredly, an amazingly blessed people!

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.