

“A Mother’s Love”

Sermon: Year B, Lent 1

Texts: Psalm 25:1–10, Genesis 9:8–17

Preached: February 18, 2018 at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, Illinois

Grace and peace to you from the God who loves you with a mother’s love, and from our Lord Jesus Christ, whose fierce loyalty to you cannot be shaken. AMEN

Do any of you remember the old song, “Mother”? It’s the one that takes the letters of the word “mother” and creates a line of lyrics that works off of each letter:

“M” is for the Million things she gave me.
“O” means only that she’s growing Old.
“T” is for the Tears she shed to save me.
“H” is for her heart of purest gold.
“E” is for her Eyes with love light shining.
“R” means Right, and right she’ll always be.
Put them all together, they spell “Mother,”
A word that means the world to me.

OK, I’m guessing that it’s not on anyone’s playlist on your electronic devices. It’s the kind of sentimental song that we don’t often sing or listen to anymore, but it’s the kind of song you can get stuck in your head. It’s a song meant to remind you of your mother’s love and faithfulness to you, and of what she means to you. And you are wondering where I’m going with this. Well, it’s not at all obvious to us, but Psalm 25 that we read together a few moments ago is written somewhat in the same fashion. We can’t see it in English, but in Hebrew, each line of the psalm begins with the ABCs in Hebrew...*aleph, bet, gimmel*... It’s written so it will be easy to remember, so it will stick in your head. It’s written as a memory device, so that you’ll hum it to yourself, recite it to yourself, so that you’ll remember the message that it conveys.

And right at the heart of it is buried an image of God that we blow right past because we don’t read it in Hebrew. “Remember, O Lord, your compassion and love, for they are from everlasting.” OK, that sounds nice enough. “Compassion.” A beautiful word. We all experience compassion at various points, I think, so we think we know what that’s about. We’ve all felt sorry for people, have felt their pain...that’s how we understand “compassion.” And then there’s “love.” A great word, too, though overused to the point that it begins to lose its impact...I “love” a person—but I also “love” ice cream. That’s a pretty broad range of emotion there, isn’t it? But those translations from the Hebrew, “love” and “compassion,” are pretty pale echoes of what the words convey in the original language.

That word we translate as “compassion”—and it’s also translated often as “mercy”—in Hebrew is *raham*. And you might be surprised to learn that the root of that word is the Hebrew word *rehem*—which means “womb.” So, God’s love for us is described as “womb love,” the love a mother feels for her yet-to-be-born child, the love a mother continues to feel for the child she has given birth to. It’s the kind of love that is one of the deepest bonds we can imagine. It’s a kind of deep love that is far beyond what our little word “love” can convey. It’s an experience of love that we men can only experience from one direction, but that women who have borne children can grasp from both directions. It’s a kind of bond that is forged as a woman carries a child under her heart, and goes through the pangs of birth, and then nurses a child at her breast. It’s the kind of love described in Isaiah 49, a passage that we read at the funeral service for Carol Rakowsky just a few weeks ago: “Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion—no *raham*—for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. See? I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands...”

We’re so conditioned to speaking of God as Father that we overlook the scriptures that represent God as Mother, as well. *Raham*—“Womb love”—is one of the psalmists’ favorite ways to describe God’s love for us. A father’s deep love is one kind of love, and a mother’s deep love is yet another, complementary and overlapping, and scripture portrays God as having both of those. So how does that change the way we understand the psalm? Suddenly, that first verse takes on a different character: “To you, O God, I lift up my soul.” The word for “soul” there is more like “my whole being, everything I am.” Picture yourself as a child, lifting up your hands, asking your mother to pick you up when you are sad, or hurt, or when you’ve done something wrong and you want to be restored to her. That’s a picture this psalm can paint. Womb love. Enduring love. Forgiving love. Love that reaches down to lift up and embrace.

Raham—“womb love”—is the anguished kind of love that grieves and cries out when her children are harmed. It is the gut-wrenching love that we saw in the Florida mother this week, crying out in pain and rage at the politicians who spout empty words and yet do nothing to stop the gun violence that is massacring our children, and that stole her child from her this week. I picture God as that mother, raging and impassioned by what she sees being done to her beloved children, demanding that justice be done, that we finally do something to prevent the slaughter of innocents. “Rachel, weeping for her children, who are no more...”

“Remember, O God, your compassion and love.” That second word that is translated “love” is another powerful Hebrew word that is only hinted at by our English word. The Hebrew word is *hesed*. In the scriptures, it is translated sometimes as “steadfast love,” sometimes as “mercy,” sometimes as “faithfulness.” But it is a word that is used to describe an essential quality of God, which is that God continues to show fiercely loyal, unshakeable love to Israel, and to us, in spite of anything we can throw in the way of the relationship with God. It’s a love that God has promised to us that is there simply because of who God is, and not because of anything we have done to merit it. It’s “mama grizzly” kind of love, to use the phrase Sarah Palin made famous. (I’m pretty sure that is the only time I have ever quoted her in a sermon.) It’s a love that endures, a love that embraces us, a love that promises to be faithful to us even when we are not faithful, a love that covenants to welcome us back, no matter how far away we may have strayed, no matter how deeply we may have fractured the relationship, no matter what the wrongs we may have done.

And even though human mothers may struggle at times to extend that kind of grace to their children, God’s promise is that God will never hesitate to welcome us back, to lift us up, to embrace us once again with a love that pardons and forgives, a love that has existed from before our birth, and that will endure throughout all time and eternity. *Hesed* love is the kind of love that is portrayed when God makes the promise to Noah—a covenant, if you look at the story carefully, that does not ask anything of Noah or his descendants. They are not asked to do anything but be in relationship as grateful recipients of God’s *hesed* in this new creation that God is bringing into being. This is a faithful love that lowers the bar for us. It’s a love that can be grieved by our brokenness, but that is always ready to make a fresh start, a new creation. It’s the same word we hear at the end of the 23rd Psalm: “Surely God’s goodness and *hesed* will pursue me all of my days.” It’s the kind of love, *hesed* love, faithful, steadfast love, that caused God to become one of us in Christ Jesus, to suffer right alongside us, to “love us to death,” to covenant with us to remember our sins and failings no more, to covenant to stand beside us no matter what may befall us, to carry us to safety in the midst of our floods.

And so we lift our hands to this mothering God, as a child does, and we plead with God to teach us, to guide us, to lead us, to instruct us in the way we should go. And lifting our hands, we ask God to lift us up in the midst of our troubles, whether those are the result of circumstance, or the result of things that others do to us, or the result of things we have done ourselves. And in the waters of baptism, in the cross of Christ marked upon us, God promises always to lift us up and welcome us back with *raham*—“womb love”—and with *hesed*—fiercely loyal covenant love—for all of our days.

And then God calls us to love others with that same kind of “womb love,” with that same kind of steadfast, loyal love that overlooks wrongs. God calls us to love the world with a mother’s love, calling out in anguish and rage when we see God’s beloved children being harmed, lifting up and providing care to those who are hungry, or naked, or struggling, or sad, or hurt, gently teaching one another the ABC’s of compassion and mercy, with love light shining from our eyes. God invites us to help give birth to a new creation. Sisters and brothers, that is the good news. Thanks be to our mothering God. AMEN