

Covenant Word

The Yearning Heart

I Kings 3:16-28, Deuteronomy 12:9-12, John 3:1-8

*A Message by
The Reverend Sarah
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Pastor
Sunday
May 11, 2008*

**Dear Friends,
Thank you for wanting
to read and study these
thoughts more
carefully. Please know
that I do not take full
credit for anything that
may be contained
within, because I may
have read or heard
something at some point
during my pilgrimage
and do not remember
its source and thus,
cannot give the rightful
author his/her credit. I
pray that you will find
inspiration and
encouragement.
Sarah Shelton**

(I am indebted to Phyllis Triple's book, God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality for much of this sermon. Chapter Two of the book, "Journey of a Metaphor," was particularly helpful and heavily used.)

The traditions that we pass from one generation to the next are strange and powerful. This is especially true of women who cluster around one another, in whatever culture, to share bits of wisdom learned from their day-to-day experiences. In particular, I think of the motherisms with which I was raised:

No problem is insurmountable, however a nap and a little something to eat, especially if it is chocolate, always makes it easier to solve!

When cooking, you should always turn the oven off five minutes before the recipe calls for the

cooking to be finished. Leave the door closed, and let the casserole soak up the heat in the oven.

A mother is more important than a husband. If a husband dies, you can always get another. But, you only have one mother.

Swallow a teaspoon of Vaseline once a day and you will never have problems of digestion.

Even if it were an 80-degree winter, if it were a Sunday in December, it was always, "the coldest Sunday of the year," and we were to wear our winter coats.

There were also slogans like: "Be steady." "Loyalty." And "Remember, you are a Jackson!"

These inherited legacies also focused around the process of giving birth and mothering. I remember strong indoctrination on no medicines being consumed during pregnancy and even stronger warnings of being sure that once the baby had arrived that the baby slept in his/her own bed. This particular word to the wise was followed with the lesson learned from the two women found in the Biblical story of I Kings. It was so engrained in me that after David was born, I would wake Lloyd up, flinging our covers around fearing that I had fallen asleep with baby David in our bed. What is it about this story that

hooks us? Almost intuitively, we know that it says more to us than what is available on the surface. Let's explore it and see.

It seems that there were two women who came to present their case before the King. Both were claiming ownership of the same child. The women are instantly identified as harlots. There is no judgment passed on these women for their involvement in the oldest profession. It is just a statement of recognition. Likewise, there is no Hollywood involvement here wherein Richard Gere comes to the rescue and changes these prostitutes into fairy-tale princesses. Instead, they are readily seen and accepted as working women. It is a situation more similar to what Gus says of Lori in the novel Lonesome Dove, when he said, "She did the best she could, considering her circumstances, but don't you hold it against her." To which the person to whom he was speaking replied, "I don't judge women that harshly. In another place, in another time, I could just as easily have been a scarlet woman." (Paraphrased from Lonesome Dove, by Larry McMurtry, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985) Such are the titles given to our sisters in the first line of the Scripture lesson.

As the story unfolds, we find out that these two women lived alone in the same house. Within three days of one another, they each gave birth to sons. There were no witnesses to these natal events. No midwives were present to assist and no men appeared to claim paternity. We are left to wonder

if they delivered each other's children. All the story tells us is that the two women and the two babies were alone in the house one night.

During that night, death came to one of the infants and deceit came to one of the women. The agent of both death and deceit was the woman, who in her slumber, unknowingly lay upon her own son and thus suffocated him. She then later exchanged him for the living child while the other harlot slept. But as is usually the case, the light of day revealed the deeds of the night. Rising to nurse her child, one woman discovered death in her bed. Upon examining the baby, the wronged woman realized that the dead child was not her own.

She is the one who goes and stands before King Solomon to report this grave injustice and to present her case with the hopes that she may recover her child. The women are locked in a power struggle. Claim and counterclaim precede the decision of the monarch. "The living child is mine, and the dead child is yours," says one woman. "No, the dead child is yours, and the living child is mine," says the other. The inversion of the words used to plead their case (i.e., living child, dead child; dead child, living child) further helps us to understand how the women have imprisoned and entrenched themselves. There appears to be no solution that will move them beyond the tragedy at hand.



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The king does not judge between the women. Instead, he recites back to them what he hears them saying. At their level of mine versus yours, there was no solution. The king, therefore, pushes them to break their egotistic and dualistic thinking by presenting an absurd solution:

He says: "Get me a sword. Divide the living child in two, and give half to the one and half to the other."

This command provided an occasion for truth to disclose itself. The ways in which the women responded to his order provided all the judgment that was needed.

Then the woman whose son was alive said to the king, because her heart yearned for her son, "Oh my Lord, give her the living child, and by no means slay it." But the other said, "It shall be neither mine nor yours; divide it."

Having allowed the women to reveal who they are and hence, to decide their own case, King Solomon needed to report only the verdict.

"Give the living child to the first woman, and by no means slay it; for she is its mother."

While this is a story of two women who have each given birth to a child, the first time that the honoring title of "mother" is given is here within the verdict. Designating one of these women as "mother" does not occur until the telling moment wherein true compassion was revealed. Scripture, here, is teaching us to distinguish the difference between a biological mother and a biblical or spiritual mother. Some translations refer to this defining compassion as being deeply stirred for our children, or having a heart that yearns for our children, or as having a womb that trembles and cries out for our children when their potential is threatened by menacing jeopardy. (Cindy Johnson, "A Mother who Gives Us a Glimpse of God," Pulpit Digest, May/June, 1994)

Difficult to translate in the fullness of its imagery, this Hebrew word in its singular form means "womb" or "uterus." In its plural form, however, its concrete meaning expands to the abstractions of compassion, mercy, and love. The metaphor presented then moves from the concrete to the abstract by moving from the actual reproduction system of a female body to an emotional state of concern that is possible for any person, regardless of gender, to feel and enact. While the womb may be the necessary physical organ to protect life at its most vulnerable points of development and ultimately, it is the womb that yields its treasure in birth so that wholeness and well-being may take place, it is compassion and mercy that make up the character and nature of those who spiritually nurture and mother us.

While this unique physical anatomy has been entrusted to women, men also participate in the journey of this biblical metaphor. For example, when Joseph sees his younger brother, Benjamin, for the first time in Egypt after years of forced separation, Joseph seeks out a private place so that he might cry. He weeps because his compassion, or more literally, his womb, yearned for his brother. (Gen. 43:30)

Likewise, the Hebrew phrase, "Yahweh merciful and gracious," presents the same maternal metaphor. It appears across the

centuries and in a variety of literary forms so that testimony of God's compassionate, merciful and loving nature is consistently given in feminine terms. "Yahweh merciful and gracious" belongs to the recitals of the saving acts of God in history that

are freely given for individual and corporate liberation. (Ps. 111:4; 145:8; Neh. 9:17) It is also found in

individual petitions for deliverance. (Ps. 86:16) It is motivation for national and divine repentance (Joel 2:13, 2 Chron. 30:9; Jon. 4:2) as well as for the unmerited forgiveness of sins, even in the presence of deceit, apostasy, rebellion, and hypocrisy (Ps. 78:38; 103:8).

Whenever we read the passage in Exodus (34:6) of Moses encountering God on Mount Sinai, we hear God use these words to describe God's self. The words are: "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and faithfulness." Whenever the mercy of God is described, we find the family of words derived from the root word "womb." It makes available to us an image of God as having a womb that weeps for us, yearns for us, and trembles with hope that we will be all that we were created and born to be.

This is exactly what Jesus teaches us as he teaches Nicodemus in our gospel reading, for it is from God that we must be born again. It is God who births us and allows us to make our own choices. It is God who suffers right along with us when we make wrong choices and it is God who celebrates with us when we make the best of choices. It is God, who like a mother eagle pushing her offspring out of the nest, teaches us to fly, and wills us to fulfill the purposes for which each of us is created. (Johnson)

This glimpse of God is a shocking sight for many. It confronts us with the reality of the breadth of God's nature that reaches so far beyond the narrow and limiting descriptions of gender specific language or any of a legion of other inadequate adjectives. It widens our view in the kaleidoscope, granting us a fuller comprehension of the multiple hues the biblical record supplies for our individual, personal portraits, as well as the image of God we carry around with us.

According to the commentaries that I read regarding this story in I Kings, this story of the two women who stood before Solomon is supposed to be about Solomon and all of his wisdom. (See Broadman Bible Commentary and The Interpreter's Bible Commentary) I would submit to you, however, that this is a

story about the capacity within each of us to take on the ability to nurture and express mercy and grace to those we encounter who need mothering. While Hallmark's Mother's Day may be about biological parenting, I would suggest that within the definition of the church and the spirituality that it encourages, that Mother's Day is a day wherein we are all challenged to consider how we will give birth

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to new life through the nurturing process of passing on God's gifts of love and comfort, caring and compassion, wisdom and celebration, tradition and forgiveness. (Wanda Henry, "A Mother's Wit")

While the story in I Kings would appear to be about an isolated case wherein a woman pleads to save her son, the larger story is about a Heavenly Parent who sacrifices his/her Son because their heart yearns for relationship with us. God's heart is so filled with compassion for us that God

pleads our case until we are returned to the very Source that gave us life and will continue to nurture us. That is why there is no better day to come to the Lord's Table than this day. For when we gather at this Table, we are charged

to remember. We are to remember our Lord who through His death births new life in each of us. We are to remember our God whose every action speaks of yearning for and seeking after us so that we might know Divine mercy and grace. We are to remember both the men and women who have facilitated birth to our personal faith...nurturing seeds of hope and encouragement...so that we might be born in newness of life.

You do not have to be a member of this church to participate in the Lord's Supper, only a believer in Jesus Christ as the Son of God. As we come to the table, let us remember God's yearning heart.

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