



Rev. Chris Taylor - 5-12-19

"A Caring Presence"

Psalm 23 ~ Acts 9:36-43

Both our texts this morning speak of God's presence and care. Peter's restoration of Dorcas wasn't so much for her sake, but for the sake of the community that had been devastated by her loss. She was a lovely, caring woman who had made a great difference in their life together. They wanted her back. They needed her. The widows showed Peter the tunics and other items that she had made for them. So God used Peter to meet their need; to bring Dorcas back and fill once more that great gap she had left behind.

That is very much the same God we encounter in the 23rd Psalm – the Good Shepherd. What a wonderful metaphor! And of course, it isn't just "our" shepherd but the deeply personal "my" shepherd that David lifts before us. This is a shepherd who knows our names, who knows what is going on in our lives; a shepherd who active and involved and provides for each of us right where we are.

These lectionary texts are perfect for Mother's Day; lifting before us a God who, like a loving mother, is there with us and for us as we make our way through life.

I think being a mother was a bit simpler when I was growing up. Back in the fifties it was pretty much a given that moms stayed at home – took care of the house, took care of the kids. Look at any of the popular television shows of that era and that's what you saw: Father Knows Best, Leave it to Beaver, the Donna Reed Show, Ozzie and Harriet.

The shift happened gradually through the sixties and seventies. By the early eighties, we found a new image of the perfect mother in Clare Huxtable: a successful lawyer who was also a center of stability and love in her home. There is more freedom today for women to make their own choices, and I think that's a good

thing. And while it has created a whole new set of expectations and pressures, I'm glad that we are in an era now when someone like my younger brother can be a stay-at-home dad when that is clearly what works best for his family.

So the model has evolved since I was a child, but the importance of a mother – and the importance of that nurturing supportive presence whether male or female – is still something worth honoring and celebrating. For many of us, our mothers offered our first experience of what God's unconditional love is like.

Mother's Day was first celebrated one hundred and eleven years ago back in 1908. A woman named Anna Jarvis held a memorial for her mother at St Andrew's Methodist Church in Grafton, West Virginia. Her mother had been a peace activist who cared for wounded soldiers on both sides during the Civil War, and afterwards had gone on to create Mother's Day Work Clubs to address public health issues.

Anna, her daughter, wanted to honor her mother who died in 1905 by continuing the work she had started. She began a campaign to make Mother's Day a recognized holiday. She felt we should honor all mothers because a mother is, in her own words, "the person who has done more for you than anyone in the world." In 1908, Congress actually rejected the proposal, but by 1911, virtually every state observed the holiday, and in 1914 President Woodrow Wilson signed a proclamation designating Mother's Day, held on the second Sunday in May, as a national holiday to honor mothers.

Jarvis was absolutely right in recognizing the enormous impact that our mothers have. One of my favorite stories to that effect – and this is a true story – concerned a Presbyterian pastor who was vacationing in the Poconos one summer. His name, if I remember correctly, was Roger Smith. On Sunday he had taken his family to a small, white clapboard church nearby. Unfortunately, it was a particularly hot morning and even though the windows were open, there was no air stirring in the church. People were having a hard time staying awake.

In the pulpit, the pastor realized he was losing the congregation and so he stopped right in the middle of his sermon and announced very loudly, "You know, the best years of my life were spent in the arms of another man's wife."

Well that woke them up. In fact, one deacon in the back pew who had gradually fallen all the way forward came up so quickly he smacked his head against the pew in front of him.

Then the preacher explained, "It was my mother." There were smiles and chuckles and appreciative murmurs, but they were awake now, attentive, and were able to follow the rest of the sermon. Smith, himself a preacher, filed the whole thing away in the back of his mind as preachers are generally inclined to do with a good story.

Well a year or two later, Smith found himself in a very similar situation with his own congregation back in Seattle. Warm day, open windows, flies buzzing around in the sanctuary. He realized that people were struggling, and that's when he remembered that preacher back in the Poconos. "You know," he announced right in the middle of his sermon, "the best years of my life were spent in the arms of another man's wife."

Sure enough, everyone came to sudden attention. And it was right then that Smith's mind went blank. He couldn't remember what came next. Confused and anxious he blurted out, "For the life of me I can't remember her name."

Of course, we do remember our mothers. We remember the sound of their voices as they read bedtime stories to us, or the comfort of their presence as we sat on their laps with their arms wrapped around us. We remember how they were there for us when something terrible happened; how they supported us and nurtured us as we made our way through the trials and tribulations of school.

For many, mom was always the go-to person when we needed advice about a relationship or about something going on at work. Mom was the one you just knew would always be there for you; the one who would always support you, always listen, always be on your side. There are a lot of people who would say with Jarvis that it is our mothers who have done more for us than anyone else in all the world. So it is right and good that we should take this day to honor them. Right and good to give thanks and recognize all that they have done.

Some of you may have heard about the passing this last week of Rachel Held Evans – just thirty seven years old, a wife and mother of two young children. She wrote and spoke for just fifteen years, but over those years became a nationally recognized voice in the Christian community. As the Atlantic put it, “for people who have felt hurt by or unwelcome in the Church, Evans provided a safe shore, full of encouragement and defiant acceptance.” She took Jesus seriously, took him at his word, and it was his teaching and his ministry that led her to reach out, to treat even those who disagreed with her with respect and care, and to make a place for the outcast and dispossessed. The Washington Post closed its own tribute to her with this:

One of Rachel’s favorite books to read to her son was “The Dark,” by Lemony Snicket. It tells of a boy who learns not to be afraid of what he can’t see. “Hi, dark,” he says, with ever greater courage. Rachel walked with us through the dark, urging us never to fear and reminding us that we are loved. She told us there was always room for us and our messy complexity. And as we struggled with uncertainty all around, she always returned us to her core conviction: We are loved. We are loved not just by her but also her all-embracing Jesus, with whom she now rests.

It’s the love her whole life was “for.”

When I think about motherhood and the essence of this faith that we profess, this to me is where it all comes together. Rachel Held Evans got it right, and it is there in her example that we catch a glimpse of what Christ calls us to be. Like her, we too can walk through the dark, take the hand of someone who is struggling, and remind them that they are loved – loved in all their messiness; loved exactly as they are.

That’s what great moms do. That’s what great Christians do. And that’s what we can do as we share the message of God’s presence and care; share the message of God’s all-embracing love in Jesus Christ.