

Mothers' love and God's love  
Hosea 11

Historically speaking, Presbyterians don't celebrate the ecclesiastical calendar. Oh, I know, it's become fashionable in some of our churches to observe Advent, Lent and Eastertide along with the feast days of Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost, but that's only been done in the last 50 years or so. Before that, we were much truer to our Puritan roots, as our worship spaces that are free of representational artwork can attest.

But at the same time, even the least liturgical of American Protestants have our own church calendar, important events that we celebrate, or at least acknowledge every year. There's the 4<sup>th</sup> of July in the summer, Veterans Day and Thanksgiving in the Fall, Christmas in the winter, and Easter and Mother's Day in the Spring. And year in and year out, Mother's Day is one of the biggest Sundays for Church attendance.

But should Christians, especially conservative, evangelical, Bible-believing, Reformed-type Christians, celebrate Mother's Day in worship? I think so, and not just because there are lots of people in the pews expecting us to do that. No, I think we need to draw attention to mothers for evangelistic reasons.

Think about it. We read responsively from I John 4 this morning that God is love. That's true, but if we are to explain that love to people who otherwise don't know God, we need to make sure they understand the concept of love. We need to find a point of contact between the reality of God and their own experience. In other words, if we are to introduce a godless world to the God Who Is Love, we need some examples of love to illustrate what we are talking about.

And those examples have become quite scarce in modern society. Over and over again, the Bible uses the example of God as a Father to explain His love for the world, but many non-Christians have no idea of what a father is supposed to be and do. Fathers are absent from more and more homes, and the fathers that do stay around are all too often either emotionally disengaged on the one hand or abusive on the other. If we try to explain God's love by saying that He is our Father, the non-Christian world may not understand what we mean.

In the early chapters of his prophecy, Hosea tried to explain God's love by saying that God is like a loving husband. Well, if effective fathers are in short supply these days, functional marriages are even scarcer. How many couples can you point to in which the husband really loves his wife in the way that Christ loves the Church? If we are to explain God's love to the current generation, we'll have to find another example.

That's why I think it's a good idea to celebrate mothers' day. For if there is one example of unconditional love left in our society, it is the sort of love that a mother has for her child. Even in these days of abortion, even when more and more women choose not to get married or to have

children, the church can still talk about a mother's love, and most people will understand what we mean. We can say, "God is love. God loves you like your mother does," and most people will understand what we are talking about.

But is that actually true? Does God love us in the same way that our mothers do? Look at verses 1-4. Doesn't a mother love her children even from the time when they are very young? Doesn't a mother teach her children to walk and take them in her arms? Doesn't a mother bend down and feed her children? Of course, and God selected these nurturing images to express the tender care that He has for His people. To someone who doesn't know God, it is perfectly legitimate to point to a mother's love as an example of what God's love is like.

But we can go further than this. For Hosea points out that when God's people sacrifice to idols and turn away from Him, God still loves them. In verses 2 and 7 He keeps on calling to them: "The more the prophets called the people, the more they went away from them. Though the prophets call the people to God On High, none of the people exalts Him."

In other words, God's love is not just nurturing – it is unconditional. God's love for us doesn't depend on our loving Him in return. God's love for us doesn't depend on our obedience or even on our thankfulness. God's love is faithful, even when we are faithless.

What better example could we give of this sort of unconditional love than that of a mother? I mean, don't we speak of "a face only a mother could love?" And how many mamas do we know who have never given up praying for their wayward sons, hoping that someday they will turn their lives around?

So, if you've got one of those mamas who never gave up on you, one of those mamas who loves you no matter what, then you've had a glimpse of the unconditional love that God has for you.

But God's love isn't just nurturing, and it isn't just unconditional. God's love is also uncompromising in its high standards. God loves us just the way we are, but He loves us too much to leave us the way we are. God's love accepts no excuses for us not being the best that we can be. And God never stops pointing out the areas of our lives in which we need to improve.

And sometimes, that requires God to use some tough love to bring us back to our senses. Look at verses 5 and 6: God says that because of His people's sin, He will send His people into exile in Assyria. God says that because His people have given their hearts to other gods, God will deliver His people into the hands of the pagans who worship those gods. God will allow His people to see that those false gods are unable to save them, so that they might turn back to Him.

How can we explain this sort of love to the world? What example can we give of someone whose love is nurturing and unconditional and uncompromising, someone who is willing to discipline us in order that we might achieve those high standards they have for us?

Well, we could turn once again to mother's example. Although they don't enjoy it, in these days of fatherless families, many mothers have been forced to take over the role of disciplinarian for their children, and many of them do this very well. And why? Because most mothers know that children need parameters, rules and guidelines to keep them safe and to help them learn to make wise and godly choices. How many reckless boys have grown to be careful and thoughtful men through the judicious application of mother's hickory switch?

But it is at this point that a mother's love fails to be an unwavering guide. After all, there are plenty of examples of mothers who can't bring themselves to discipline their children, choosing instead to enable their bad behavior. Others relieve the strain of parenting by lashing out at their children in inappropriate ways. Child abuse isn't only done by dads, you know. Other mothers are gone too much or too distracted to be consistent disciplinarians. And so appealing to the example of the loving, caring discipline of a mother can only go so far in illustrating God's uncompromising, disciplining love.

And let's face it – it is this last aspect of God's love that is frankly the least attractive, not only to non-Christians, but to us as well. Of course everyone wants someone to nurture them, to love them unconditionally. But who is really interested in meeting uncompromising standards? All of us Americans, regardless of our generation, take pride in setting our own standards, and in refusing to let others tell us what to do. So, how can God's discipline be attractive to any of us?

But we can't deny that God disciplines us precisely because He loves His people so much, because He wants to bring us back into a close relationship with Him, no matter what it takes. Look at verses 8 and 9. When God sees the rebellious nature of His people, His heart is turned over within Him, and all His compassions are kindled. Yes, because of His perfect wisdom and justice, God knows that His people need to experience the consequences of their sins. God is not an enabler. But at the same time, God doesn't want to treat His people like Admah and Zeboiim, cities that were destroyed along with Sodom and Gomorrah, when God rained down fire and brimstone from Heaven because of the stench of their wickedness.

No, instead of wanting to blast His people, God wants to redeem His people. And so even when we often allow our fierce anger, even with those whom we love most, to boil over in its intensity, verse 9 says that God is not like us. Even when we are tempted to disengage from those people who hurt us most deeply, God is not like us. God won't give up on sinners like us – God will come to summon His people, but He will not come with terror.

Instead, God will come to change the hearts of His people, as verses 10 and 11 make clear. When He roars like a lion, displaying His power and His displeasure with the sin of the world, His people will come trembling to Him. God will once again settle His people in the land,

and dwell in their midst, being their God and making them His people, showing them the nurturing, unconditional, yet chastening love that Hosea has explained so clearly.

But how can we make this sort of love attractive to people who don't trust God? How will the Lion's roar attract those who tremble in His presence, who desire nothing more than to run away from Him? How can we explain God's holy and righteous love to a people who reject rules and who despise discipline?

We must interpret God's love for His people in the same way that He did – not so much through the powerful roar of a lion but through the silent sacrifice of a lamb. Look again at verse 1 – “out of Egypt I called my son.” Matthew tells us that this verse was fulfilled in the life of Jesus Christ when, as a young child, He and His parents had to flee into Egypt to escape the wrath of Herod. From His birth, the Son of God thus shared in the misery and oppression of His people. Even though He was sinless from birth, He experienced the consequences of sin in personal and painful ways from His earliest days.

In other words, Jesus didn't just stand at the door of Heaven, urging us to stop sinning and come back to Him. No, He entered into our experience, sharing the grief and pain that our sinful lives have caused. And then He took on Himself the punishment due to those sins, satisfying in His own body the penalty that our rebellion deserved.

So yes, a mother's love is a great place to start when explaining God's nurturing, unconditional love to a godless world. But if we want people to see God's uncompromising, chastening love in all its fulness, if we want them to see how God's perfect wisdom and justice can somehow fit in with His love, we need to take them to the foot of the cross. For on the one hand, the cross shows us the punishment our sins deserve, and thus the uncompromising nature of God's love. But the cross also shows us the extent to which God is willing to go to reconcile a sinful world to Himself, and thus the unconditional nature of God's love.

So, let's celebrate the fulness of God's love, of Christ's love for us as we take up our hymnals and sing all the stanzas of “Jesus Thy Boundless Love to Me.”