

May 12, 2013
Mother's Day 2013

Motherhood is
Proverbs 31:10-31

Opening words: I have selected our scripture lesson for today for personal reasons. It is the only connection I have to my paternal grandmother. I never knew her. This is the story. It is part of the fabric of my family. It was a Sunday in January of 1950. She had spent the morning teaching Sunday School. She suffered a fatal heart attack while preparing the family lunch. My sisters were born several months later. I was born seven years later. I have only seen old faded photographs of her. I have one of her personal possessions, her Bible. It is an old well-worn King James Version. There is hardly a mark in it. The only words underlined are this morning's scripture lesson, Proverbs 31:10-31. When I hear these words, I think of a woman I never knew. Let me call this message *Motherhood is...*

Proverbs 31:10-31

- ¹⁰ A wife of noble character who can find?
She is worth far more than rubies.
- ¹¹ Her husband has full confidence in her
and lacks nothing of value.
- ¹² She brings him good, not harm,
all the days of her life.
- ¹³ She selects wool and flax
and works with eager hands.
- ¹⁴ She is like the merchant ships,
bringing her food from afar.
- ¹⁵ She gets up while it is still night;
she provides food for her family
and portions for her female servants.
- ¹⁶ She considers a field and buys it;
out of her earnings she plants a vineyard.
- ¹⁷ She sets about her work vigorously;
her arms are strong for her tasks.
- ¹⁸ She sees that her trading is profitable,
and her lamp does not go out at night.
- ¹⁹ In her hand she holds the distaff
and grasps the spindle with her fingers.
- ²⁰ She opens her arms to the poor
and extends her hands to the needy.
- ²¹ When it snows, she has no fear for her household;
for all of them are clothed in scarlet.

- ²² She makes coverings for her bed;
she is clothed in fine linen and purple.
- ²³ Her husband is respected at the city gate,
where he takes his seat among the elders of the land.
- ²⁴ She makes linen garments and sells them,
and supplies the merchants with sashes.
- ²⁵ She is clothed with strength and dignity;
she can laugh at the days to come.
- ²⁶ She speaks with wisdom,
and faithful instruction is on her tongue.
- ²⁷ She watches over the affairs of her household
and does not eat the bread of idleness.
- ²⁸ Her children arise and call her blessed;
her husband also, and he praises her:
- ²⁹ "Many women do noble things,
but you surpass them all."
- ³⁰ Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting;
but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.
- ³¹ Honor her for all that her hands have done,
and let her works bring her praise at the city gate.
-

What is your first childhood memory? This is mine. I was of preschool age, three or four years old. I was in the kitchen of our family home. It was a cold winter's morning and I was still wearing my footy pajamas. I remember the heat rushing out of the floor register. The breakfast dishes were still on the table. Normally, my mother would have rushed into action to clean up. However, this day was different. On that day, she ignored the dishes and focused on me. She pulled out a chair and placed me on her lap. She began to read a book to me. The combination of the warm air and her soft voice made me feel safe and secure. It was as if time was standing still and I was the only one that really mattered. It isn't much of a story but it is mine. I don't know why I remember that particular morning, but I will never forget it. It is my first childhood memory. What is your first childhood memory?

Can I make a confession? I write over fifty sermons a year but this is the one that I struggle with the most. I do not struggle because I had a terrible mother. I struggle because I had a good mother. She died several years ago and I still struggle with her death. I miss her more now than I did on the day she died. It is only now I am beginning to appreciate the life that she lived. This is her story.

Her name was Ruth. She was the older of two daughters born to Walter and Nina Milligan of Brooklyn, New York. She attended P.S. 92 and graduated from Erasmus Hall High School. Against public opinion, during the Second World War, she went to Pratt Institute and studied dietetics.

Young women were not encouraged to attend college at that time. After graduation, against public opinion, she moved to Jersey City, New Jersey and worked in a hospital. Young women were not encouraged to live alone at that time. Against public opinion, she began working on her Master's degree. Her future in the New York area seemed bright, but one night everything changed. On that night the work and the studies were placed to the side. She attended a social gathering at the Marble Collegiate Church. The Second World War had just ended and dances were held so returning soldiers could meet single women. She met a young, dark-haired man named Ronald from Ohio. At first, she wasn't interested in him because she thought he was Catholic. She was suddenly interested in him when she found out he was Protestant. In time, they married and moved to magical place called Warren, Ohio, where everyone is a little smarter and better looking. In more time, they had three children and their simple house became a home. As I annually struggle with these messages, I rediscover the same fact. Daily, I am reaping the benefits of her priorities. The most important thing in her life was not her work. The most important thing in her life was her children. Nothing else really mattered. She would be the first one to admit it; she was not a perfect person. She made mistakes and she knew disappointment. However, I can testify today that she was a good mother. I miss her more with each passing Mother's Day. What is your mother's story?

Today, we are instructed from the Old Testament book of Proverbs. Tradition tells us Solomon wrote it. That means you can date these words about the tenth century BC. A proverb is nothing more than a piece of truth or wisdom. Usually, each proverb stands alone. This morning's words are different. They are meant to be heard in a single piece. It is an ancient acrostic poem, the verses of which begin with the successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Academically, it is very interesting. However, that is not our purpose. Our purpose for gathering is to make disciples for Jesus Christ. These words are important to us because they are so practical. They tell us three things. First, these ancient words tell us motherhood is always **changing**. Second, these ancient words tell us motherhood is always **challenging**. Third and finally, these ancient words tell us motherhood, itself, is a divine **calling**. It is those three things I want to look at today. So if you are ready to begin, say, "**Amen!**"

Changing

On Tuesdays I generally arrive at the church late in the morning. I visit the various groups that are here. I visit the sewing ladies because they have all the solutions to various church problems. I visit the district office because they have the latest news in other United Methodist congregations in the area. I visit the Helping Hand ladies because they feed me. As we drink coffee, eat baked goods and gag down fruit cake, we talk about nothing. There is a woman in the Helping Hand that said something that made me think. She said, "My son is going to retire soon. I can't believe he is sixty years old!" Can I be honest with you? I can't believe my children are 28 and 23 years old. Can you believe how old your children are?

One of the reasons we don't want to admit the age of our child is we don't want to admit our own age. How can it be that a young person like you has children that age?

First, motherhood is changing. I am not talking about the changing expectations of motherhood in our society. We know they have changed tremendously. I am talking about the changing relationships that mothers have with their children. Eighty per cent of American just don't like change. Your relationship with your child has to change because they are always changing. Your relationship with your newborn is not the same as the one with your high school student. Your relationship with your high school student is not the same as with your adult children. Your relationship with your children is always changing. The people who struggle the most are the people who refuse to let their relationship with their children evolve. I challenge you today to accept your children's age. Ask yourself the question: what were you doing when you were their age? Remember, love is flexible! If that makes you think, say, "**Amen!**"

Challenging

The most influential person in Abraham Lincoln's life was his stepmother, Sarah Bush Lincoln. His mother, Nancy, died when he was nine years old. He and his father, Thomas, were never close. Sarah was the one who encouraged him to study. She was the one who encouraged him to chase his own dreams. When I get to heaven I want to meet Sarah Lincoln. I want to tell her she did a good job with Abraham. Indirectly, she changed and saved America. She did this not as a mother. She did it as his stepmother. There is no less rewarding job in our society than being a step-parent. If you do it properly, you pray and sacrifice like the biological parents, but you are only the step parent. You are always trumped by genetics. There is a great deal of responsibility without much authority.

Second, motherhood is challenging. In the scripture lesson for today we are told about the various roles that mothers play. She has this complex relationship with her husband. She has this complex responsibility with her children. She is involved in every corner of everyone's life. She is responsible for the home and her place in society. Being a step-parent is even more challenging. Being a step-parent means you have accepted the responsibility of raising someone else's child. I would challenge you today to thank a step-parent for doing what is right. The beginning of verse 15 summarizes her life, "*She gets up while it is still dark.*" Remember, love is flexible. If that makes you think, say, "**Amen!**"

Calling

The founder of the great Methodist movement was John Wesley. His father Samuel was a pastor, but it was his mother, Susannah, who had the greatest influence on his life. John was one of nineteen children; ten died during infancy. Susannah knew a thing or two about parenting. She had six rules for raising children:

1. Subdue self-will in a child and thus work together with God to save his soul.
2. Teach him to pray as soon as he can speak.

3. Give him nothing he cries for and only what is good for him if he asks for it politely.
4. To prevent lying, punish no fault which is freely confessed, but never allow a rebellious, sinful act to go unnoticed.
5. Commend and reward good behavior.
6. Strictly observe all promises you have make to your child.

I love those rules because each one is found in the Christian faith. They are rules that you could use today.

Third, motherhood is a calling. Verse thirty says, *"Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised."* What does that mean? It means the foundation of everything she does is God. It is one thing to care for the needs in this world. It is another thing to care for your child's eternity. I don't think I could enjoy heaven if my children were absent. As a child, I always had a hot meal. I always had clean clothes. Our home was spotless, but in the long run those things really didn't matter. In the long run the only thing that matters is eternity. The only thing that matters is salvation. When is the last time you prayed for your children's salvation? If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

It was early spring in 2002. I hadn't sat on my mother's lap near the floor register in years. Instead, I sat near her death bed. She was dying from a broken heart. She was sleeping comfortably. My father had died six years earlier and she was unhappy. My sister, Susan, and I did what we could. We were taking turns sitting with her so she would not be alone. It was my turn and I sat in the shadows of her room at Crandall Medical Center at Copeland Oaks. The hour grew late and I began to think of everything that had to happen the next day. In the silence of that room I decided to leave. I leaned over and kissed her. I said, "I love you." From some unknown power source, she suddenly had a moment of clarity. She responded, "I hope so. I am your mother!" I am a better person because she was.

The scripture lesson for today is true! Motherhood is always **changing**. Your children are always changing so your relationship with your children must change. Motherhood is always **challenging**. It is more challenging all the time. How many hats do you wear in your life? Motherhood is a divine **calling**. You have been entrusted with someone whom God loves. Solomon said it best in verse 28 of our scripture lesson, *"Her children arise and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her."* And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"** Happy Mother's Day!

History of Mother's Day

You know the story. I have told you about the birth of the modern American Mother's Day in the past. It all began with the death of Anna Reese Jarvis in 1908. Her daughter, Anna M. Jarvis, didn't want her to be forgotten, so she campaigned for the creation of an official Mother's Day. She dreamed of having a day when all mothers would be honored. She began by petitioning the superintendent of the St. Andrew's Methodist Church in Grafton, West Virginia. Her mother had spent over twenty years there teaching Sunday School. Her request was granted and the first Mother's Day celebration was held on May 10, 1908. Four hundred and seven people attended. Anna Jarvis arranged for white carnations — her Mother's favorite flower — to adorn the patrons. Two carnations were given to every Mother in attendance. The idea grew fast. By 1909, forty-six different states were observing Mother's day. In 1912, West Virginia became the first state to officially observe Mother's Day. In 1914, Woodrow Wilson signed into law the national observance of Mother's Day. There is not a single person in this room that didn't have a mother. How often have you thought of her today?