

Homily: Stories of Our Mothers

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The covid crisis is not over. We have a long way to go. Not only do we have a lot to figure out around re-entering shared spaces, the impact of how and why we have been separated will echo for a long time. Today, I'm increasingly aware of what this means specifically for mothers. The unique ways in which this situation has challenged, stretched and weighed on motherhood cannot be ignored.

There's an article in the Washington post this week titled, "*Ditch the flowers for Mother's Day — here's what America's moms really need*". In the first sentence, the author Petula Dvorak says it clearly, "...*what America's moms really deserve — and want — is their 25 cents.*" Data shows that working mothers make .75 for every \$1.00 on average compared with their male counterparts. Basically, the system is set up to penalize mothers for parenthood while it rewards fathers. The "provider" culture of masculinity in this country is deep. I am regularly in spaces where conversations about masculinity take place and frankly this is true at all ages from teen boys to elder men, that there is a sense of needing to "provide" for a family. There is no rationality to what men are taught about being the "hunter/ gatherer" in a culture where putting food on the table has absolutely nothing to do with the ability to outrun a mastodon.

Through this time of pandemic, I have heard numerous stories inside of our congregation and among my colleagues and friends about how mothers are being forced to make hard choices about their careers. I am not here today so much to tell those stories, mothers themselves should make that choice, I am here to invite you in your world to listen to those stories. And when I say listen, I mean listen. If you are hearing these stories, you don't need to offer your pity or solutions, particularly if you are male identified. Just listen. When you listen to the stories, you don't need to make a show of how it impacts you either. It is more important that you take the information with you and change the world.

There was a recent NPR story about a woman who put off seeing the doctor in person about a breast ailment that turned out to be cancer. Her situation was brought about by a combination of misdiagnosis through telehealth and also hesitancy to seek the proper care during covid. But the real issue was her reluctance to take time off of work because of the impact it would have on supporting her family. As a single mother, the fragile balance between providing for her child, needing to work and maintaining her

own health, would be thrown off balance if she took time off. I pray for her and every mother making choices like this.

Technology has allowed us to continue to meet and has actually offered us as a church community, opportunities to deepen relationships. People who are privileged as we are (for anyone watching this has the privilege of access to the technology to do so) largely have the opportunity to work remotely, to adjust our worlds accordingly to remain “productive.” But this same technology that allows some of us to work remotely, has been a minefield for young people in their schooling. Navigating that minefield has fallen primarily to mothers. As such, mothers have had to take leaves of absence from careers they have fought long and hard to build, even dropping entirely out of the work force. There is some data saying that the impact of the pandemic on an entire generation of women will be felt for years to come. And mothers who don’t have the privilege of working remotely have been especially torn in their choices.

Then there is the loss. Mothers losing spouses, children, parents. We are all fairly well bruised by the losses of covid, but I think mothers who have a special connection to the continuum of life, who often sit at the most pivotal points of what it means to build and sustain a family, no matter what that family size or structure...I think mothers are experiencing loss in a way that those of us who are not mothers cannot really understand.

I’m sharing what may seem like a litany of gloom and burden for a reason. I share it because through all of these different challenges and with all of the different stories I hear about the professional, cultural, emotional and social gymnastics that mothers are being asked to perform through this time...I don’t hear any of them giving up.

What I hear instead is acknowledgement of the pain and deep disappointment and then the resourcefulness to figure out what comes next. Motherhood through covid, at least from my perspective as a male identified, single, non-parent, is the ultimate both/and exercise. Mothers exercising the human capacity to hold both tragedy and joy; both sorrow and hope; both resourcefulness and mourning.

Months ago, early in the pandemic, I shared a message where I expressed how I believed this time would reveal to us our greatest weaknesses and the places where we are surprisingly strong. This has come to pass. But for some of us, the contrast between what works and what doesn’t work has been too much to bear. The whiplash of ups and downs has put some of us into a place of deep distrust for the future. For mothers however, life’s epic contrasts are just another day at the office. Motherhood in this time has been forced to hold the disconnect between a magical technological world, and a child who won’t engage; a job literally saving lives and having to quarantine from your own family to save theirs...and so much more. Yes, we can ditch the flowers for Mother’s Day...lets learn something from motherhood instead.

What I'm choosing to learn from motherhood is that motherhood is ministry in its most pure and human form. Motherhood holds so much hope and invites personal dreams and the dreams of others. It is a literal and figurative foundation for thriving. In ministry, we try desperately to mimic this but mothers have the ability to inspire fully locked up. There is nothing that can compare to the encouragement of mothers.

And at the same time, motherhood actively takes on the challenge of making sense out of an unsensible world. The tears a mother sheds in loss are not just hers alone, but for everyone around her who is impacted by that loss. And when it is time to regroup, mothers find a way out of no way and they pave the path for the rest of us to continue on the journey.

I wonder what it would look like for communities like ours to hold a unique covenant for how we embrace motherhood? Not a creed, although the Hail Mary can be pretty powerful in the right setting. But something that says "we get it." Honestly, other non-Western cultures do this. There is a specific place for motherhood at all stages and a special place for elder women as "mother's" of the community. One day in May is not enough. We all have so much we could learn from the impact of motherhood on our lives. And we have so much in turn that we can give to motherhood so that it can thrive. But in order to do any of that, we cannot just take mothers for granted or assume they will do the work or assume they will quit their jobs or assume their pain is just part of the job. What if we took it upon ourselves to have an ongoing commitment to thriving *with* motherhood as opposed to just thriving *from* it.

I started this message with the quote from an article about the economic imbalance that mothers face in the United States from the covid crisis. Part of why I wanted to do this is because I also think there is some irony here. Certainly, Mothers should not be penalized financially or professionally for motherhood. Equal pay and work opportunities should be the gold standard of how we function as a culture. But motherhood is unmeasurable on an economic scale. It is priceless. Motherhood cannot be commodified or capitalized. This might be why a male dominated workforce has continued the inequality. It knows full well that mothers should be paid even more than the rest of the worker bees who only bring nectar back to the hive while mothers bring nectar, birth the young, build the hive, manage the hive and keep it safe and more.

This Mother's Day, more than breakfast in bed, flowers or a scarf, take the time to ask yourself what you learn from motherhood every day. Whether you are yourself a mother, or not, consider the lessons of resilience and reality that make up every day for those who offer us the gift of their mothering in this world. The best present we can give them is living every day in ways that honor and respect this treasure that will always be worth ten times its value on the dollar.

May it be so.