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Behold Your Mother – John 19:25-27

First, a comment on the language we use about God. How many of you have heard a sermon about God as mother? I know you've often heard God called "Father," especially by Jesus and in our liturgy.

Many people have trouble with family images about God and the church. Before you jump in and say to yourself, "not me!" or "this is different" or some other reason to dismiss their concerns, think for a minute why *you* have that gut reaction. And then, realize that those who struggle with their relationship (or lack of relationship) with their parents or family are having a gut reaction every time *they* hear that father/mother/family language.

Far too often that impedes, if not completely blocks, our ability to share the love of God *for* them *with* them.

It's simply not fair to dismiss their concerns simply because we may not share them. If you want to ask the old question, "What would Jesus do?", I believe he'd try to heal the pain. If we claim to be his disciples, we ought to, as well.

God is not like us. The attributes of God are the ultimate of the very best a human mother or father or family member can be; but no one is capable of that level of care *except* God.

At the same time, these parental and family images have a strong positive effect for many, which is why we continue to use them, and why, I think, Scripture does, too. They may well be the best human language can do. But God can always do more, and do it better.

And even though today is not Mothers' Day, today our focus is on a mother - Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Valerie has shared with me that the hardest part of the Passion for her is the pain Mary had to endure at the cross. How could she bear such horror? How could she watch her son die? How could God let something like this take place – or, as we say we believe, make something like this happen, even if it means the salvation of all humanity?

Valerie is not the first to ask those questions, nor will she be the last, because they are questions that strike at the heart of our compassion. Read from two thousand years away, about someone else, they can lose their impact. Try, if you can, to imagine what it truly was like for that poor, that incredibly blessed, that fully human woman, Mary, mother of our Savior.

What could it have possibly been like to stand at the cross? Some of you know a similar experience, but not quite the same – no two are alike.

The Gospel of John is unique in describing this scene for us. I believe the reason it is here is not so much about the characters in the story as it's about the nature and love of God for you.

Protestant theology has downplayed women for centuries, strangely, even the women of the Bible. There's reason behind that; Roman Catholicism had gone overboard, arguably, in its emphasis on Mary, an emphasis that was more than adulation, it was – and is still, in some ways – worship. And our understanding of the Bible and of God does not have a place for worship of anything or anyone *but* God, the triune God.

Still, this passage is telling us something important about God's love that we'll miss if we just think of it as only being about the three characters in this brief anecdote.

This next bit comes from one of the ancient church writers, Origen. (Now, this is abstract, I'm warning you; but stick with me.)

Most Christians, even Protestants, believe something fundamental about Mary. That is, she is “the mother of God.” “Born of the Virgin Mary,” as the Apostles' Creed says. It's a bit mind-bending, but consider this: Mary gave birth to Jesus, who is

the Christ, the second person of the Trinity, and therefore in some mystical way, God. Did she create Jesus? No. But Mary's was the body in whom God came to dwell as one of us, the human woman who carried in her womb God made human.

That's amazing.

But another part of this is that as good Protestants, we believe that Jesus Christ is with and among us, that he is not just our brother in faith, but is truly our sibling, and has his own place in our very being.

Origen – that ancient theologian I mentioned a bit ago - says that when Jesus explicitly identifies and commissions the bond between his mother Mary and the beloved disciple (“Woman, here is your son,” and “Here is your mother”) Jesus is really talking about his true family, his “mother and brothers and sisters” (that he refers to in that troubling passage in Matthew 12), and whom he loves, cares for, and who believe in him. That, friends, includes you and me.

What all this means, and Origen's point, is that insofar as we all have Christ within us, are all somehow siblings of Jesus Christ, Mary is *our* mother. Our spiritual mother; and in some way even our ancestral mother as well. So while we all have our human ancestry, our lineage, Mary, mother of Jesus, is in there too. If

you're into genealogy, you'll just have to add another line somewhere to that family tree.

All right. We've talked about the importance of accepting and accommodating those who have trouble with traditional language about God and the church. I've tried to make a case for you that Mary, Jesus' mother, ought to have a place in your faith, because her role in our salvation is so critical and relates us to Jesus.

So, how could that change your life, your perspective, your call as a Christian? Here's some thoughts. It means that motherhood, whether actual or potential, is a blessing, whether it feels like it at eight and a half months pregnant or at two in the morning after three months of no sleep with a colic-y kid, whether you never have or ever will bear a child, or whether you go without food so that your child can eat, or dealing with that unrecognizable teenager (yours or someone else's), or – watching yourself die in your child dying before you. Dying inside while still living.

Let's make this real personal, for all of us. When you decide to make an unhealthy choice in your life, and cannot imagine God, the far-off creator of the universe, caring, remember that woman who stood beneath the cross that was erected for you, and ask yourself whether your mother Mary feels pain over your choice. We know Jesus our brother does; I believe that God our Father

does; but might it just make a difference if you thought that this special, if completely human, woman does, too? What if Mom were watching?

And another piece: if I'd been here last week, we would have gone through my annual exercise of reminding us that we all had or have mothers. I think this day of my own mother, nearly ninety-nine years old; I think of the hopes and dreams she had for each of her children, and how my siblings and I lived them out.

I know we all could have done better. But so, too, could we have done better – and still do better – to meet the purpose that God has set for us, that God used Mary and motherhood to accomplish – to spread the news of salvation, of new life – and remember that God *did* give his Son Jesus a *human* mother. To borrow from the Christmas carol, “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” “the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee” - not Bethlehem, but in Mary, in Christ, in us, *every day*. How can we meet such a challenge?

One way is to act with the mother's love, the parental love, of God toward all we meet. My mother, though she had four children, managed to adopt informally dozens of people in our community over her lifetime: some of them even called her “Mom.” And why? Because she cared about them. She cared for

them. She showed them God's love. They could tell that she loved them, without her saying a word.

Can we, in our own relationships, create the idea of what loving parent and family relationships – in a divine sense – with those who simply can't relate because of what they experienced in their own lives? And wouldn't that be an incredible gift to our world if we did, with God's help?

How will you do that for someone? Maybe even yourself...

I think that would make Mary proud. And her Son. And our Father.