

“Don’t Mess With Mother!”

First Sunday after the Epiphany: January 9, 2011

Gen. 1:27, Isaiah 66:13-14, Galatians 3:26-28

A homily by Rev. Dr. Ivan H.M. Peden

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Last Wednesday night a number of us watched the NOOMA DVD titled *She*. At the beginning of the DVD Rob Bell tells a story about how he was out bike riding and came upon a flock of geese. The Mother Goose was leading her children around the lake and was not too keen about the new visitor on wheels. Bell said that he appeared to be a threat. The Mother Goose honked and honked but when Bell did not retreat she lowered her head and charged at him like a battering ram, sounding off a terrifying hiss that Bell describes as “coming straight from the pits of hell.” Needless to say, Bell picked up his bike and ran away feeling very humiliated, and thinking to himself, “You don’t mess with Mother Goose”.

As he reflected on this incident he realized that this maternal instinct is universal. This instinct of a mother to protect her children transcends culture, politics, economics. It is how mothers are wired. Bell says this is a divine impulse. There is something inherently “God-like” about a mother stopping at nothing to protect her children. We might say that there is also something inherently “mother-like” ...something maternal ...about God who would stop at nothing – not even self-giving unto death – in order to protect God’s children. Is it not fair to ask: If we better understand the maternal dimension of God – a dimension far too often ignored – surely we would better understand the lengths God would go to in order to protect God’s children?

Just as in Rob Bell’s experience Mother Goose’s maternal instinct would cause her to go to great lengths to provide for and to protect her goslings, so God has shown us in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ to what lengths God instinctively would go to save humankind. The first chapter of Genesis reminds us that God created humankind in God’s image ...that God created male and female human beings. They gather around God, their Creator, feeling safe and secure. They know the voice of God. Should one of them ever get lost, God will search everywhere until the lost one is found. They feel loved by God who will do anything to protect them. God is not angry with them for being dependent on God – in fact,

it brings God great joy to know that humans need and trust God. God believes that one day all humankind will trust God in the same way.

This is the idyllic picture representing the Garden of Eden in the book of Genesis. But read into chapter two of Genesis. We know that things don't remain quiet, calm, and secure for God's creatures. Suddenly an intruder interrupts their communion and seeks to divide them. This intruder could potentially divert their attention away from God and lead them astray ...lead them down a path that God knows would be harmful, perhaps even deadly. God will have none of that and stands firmly against the intruder and the threat that this intruder represents. Instead, God stands for life not death, truth not falsehood, justice not injustice, love not fear, and liberty not oppression for all humankind. But the intrusion of evil is pervasive and threatens to overtake and destroy God and humankind. The evil intruder sends God in Christ to endure a terrible death while providing for and protecting humankind. But that is not where the story ends, right? There is good news of victory and triumph over the intrusion of evil ...and this is where it gets personal and involves you and me ...

Sin in all its forms tries to disrupt our secure relationship and quiet, calm communion with God. Left to ourselves we could wander down all sorts of paths that have the potential to harm us and take us away from God who alone is able to protect and save us. Recognizing this threat, and with the greatest self-sacrifice that this world has known – not unlike the self-sacrifice of a mother for her children – God in the person of Jesus Christ charged all the way to Calvary. On the Cross of Christ hell and all that could violate communion between God and God's children were delivered a deathly blow. And the "Enemy" limped away – humiliated, defeated thinking this thought: "You don't mess with God!"

Consider for a moment how important a mother is. Few roles have such a profound impact on future generations. Let us remember that none of us had anything to do with our birth. We are all here because some woman somewhere gave us life. It's all about a mother's pain ...a mother's effort ...for our life. And when a mother gives like that to a child, she is showing us what God is like. But sometimes this part of God's nature is overlooked.

Most Christians have grown up reading the Bible and being exposed to language and images of God that are mostly masculine. Most of us are very comfortable with male imagery for God, and there is nothing wrong with that whatsoever. Because God is beyond

comprehension, we use things we know about to help us understand who God is ...for example, masculine language and images. That is helpful, but it's just not the whole story. In the Bible there also is female imagery and language for God. The Bible talks about God as giving birth, nursing, mothering, protecting, and comforting. As I said earlier when speaking about Mother Goose, maybe if we were more aware of the feminine imagery for God we would have a better understanding of who God is and what God is like. However, God is not limited to gender.

In his dvd Bell affirms, "There is a masculine dimension to God, and there is a feminine dimension to God." But he goes on to say: "Now these images can be very helpful in describing the divine. But Jesus said that God is Spirit. And Spirit has no shape; it has no form; it has no physical essence. I mean, God is, in essence, beyond male and female. Or perhaps you could say it more accurately: God transcends and yet includes what we know as male and female." And this is where I must add that when it comes to the mystery of God's nature, language, metaphors, analogies, and all figures of speech are hopelessly inadequate and insufficient. The well known Christian author and teacher, Frederich Buechner, puts it this way: "We bore to death both God and ourselves with our chatter. God cannot be expressed but only experienced. If we only use things that are stereotypically male, we miss experiencing a significant portion of who God is."

Here is the good news of God's Word today: When we feel forgotten and forsaken we find comfort, not from a flawed mother or an abusive mother, but from a God who will not fail to care or fail to remember us – even when the whole world is turned upside down and the best human mother runs out of maternal compassion. Israel found comfort and faith through the words of the prophets that it would indeed be preserved through its Babylonian exile and would return to the Promised Land.

We, too, can find comfort that God will preserve us through our exiles – the times when we are alienated, excluded, marginalized, side-lined, rejected, left out – and God will return us to the joy of God's blessing. Among other comforting pictures of God that you have found helpful, keep in mind a picture of God like an ideal human mother who cannot forget the baby that came from her womb. There is much comfort in that picture.

I asked myself this question in my preparation: Apart from the comfort that we draw from a maternal image of God, what other applications are there to our daily lives? I came up

with two responses ... First, in Genesis 1:27 the fact that humans were created male and female in the image of God is foundational to any discussion about the equality of the sexes. Not surprisingly, the apostle in Galatians chapter 3 reminded his readers that “in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female ...for all have become one in Christ.”

A church in which women are not encouraged and granted opportunity to serve as vital members of the Christian community is both disobedient and unhealthy. In the dvd Rob Bell emphasizes that the role played by women was revolutionary in the early Christian church. Women were witnesses to the resurrection which was ground breaking enough in its day. “In the early church there were women leading, organizing, making decisions,” Bell says, and then adds: “It was women who supported Jesus, his teachings and travels. It was women who paid Jesus’ bills.”

As we install and ask for God’s blessing to rest upon our those who will hold leadership positions in our church today, we affirm that God has gifted Christian men *and* women to serve and function together in the church—the body of Christ. Every part of the body is necessary. That is my first response. I hope it is yours, too.

The second response I had was this: Whether you are a woman or a man, a female or a male, we are all called at times to be “mother-like” or “father-like” to the lost and the searching, to the wounded and the needy. Irrespective of our gender, we all have both maternal and paternal instincts for we are made in the image of God – who while God is neither male nor female – is the Source of all masculinity and femininity. We are life givers by God’s infinite design, and to be that at all, our love must include both a mother’s love and a father’s love. But, then, our love must go beyond gender ... You see, above all, as redeemed people of God, we must love with Christ’s redeeming love. And that’s some kind of love to give!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.