

MOTHER'S DAY

Gratitude for Our Earth Mothers

James 3:17, 1 Corinthians 13:1-8a

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La Verne Church of the Brethren

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I always thought my mother was wonderful. As a child I wrote her love notes and slipped them under her pillow or into the mailbox. But I didn't really understand what it cost her to be a mother, until I became one; and I didn't fully grasp just how much she loved me, until I knew the depth of love I have for my own children. I learned when I had children that parenting is really a long lesson in letting go....in releasing into the world what I birthed...releasing what was not mine to contain. My mother sent me out into the world in such an elegant way. Oh, the advantages of being the youngest.

Now that she is gone it seems like there is so much of consequence I still want to say to her. It isn't that I didn't tell my mother I loved her. But now that I can't talk to her, I yearn to thank her for everything she taught me; the way she loved me; the legacy she leaves me. I ache to have a deep conversation, dripping in gratitude, in which I very specifically tell her that I see her love and sacrifice and wisdom. It's like the Joni Mitchell song goes, "You don't always know what you've got till it's gone."

It wasn't like my mother made it easy to speak those words to her. She was raised in the era in which you deflected all comments of love and praise. I remember when she was in the hospital, and very ill. My sister and I were sitting by her bedside and she appeared to be slipping away from us. We stationed ourselves on each side of her bed and spoke our love. We recounted story after story that portrayed her goodness, believing that even if she didn't respond she could still hear us. We wept so hard. It was emotionally exhausting. Finally, my sister said, "I need to go for a walk." I said, "Me too." As we walked around the block, we continued to talk about who our mother was and had been for each of us. When we returned to the room, my mother was sitting up and eating a bowl of soup. I said, "Mom, we thought we were losing you. We just spent 45 minutes declaring our love for you and talking about all the things you did for us." With a deadpan look on her face she said, "I bet you feel silly."

To all of you who have mothers who are still living, speak your love and gratitude now while you have the opportunity. If this year has taught us anything it is how deeply important our families are and how quickly we can lose them. To all you mothers, please allow us to do it without stopping us. We need to speak our truth to you, and you need to allow us to do it. To those of you without mothers living....and to those of you with mothers who are still with us, I want to talk to you about the women in our lives...the kind of women for which Shawn wrote his new song...mothering women who may or may not be your biological mothers. Those women we need to listen to when they speak and watch what they do when they act. Those women we need to follow behind because they carry within their souls a profound wisdom.

Will read to us about wisdom today from the book of James. The focus in James is on how to live a good life. The answer is, seek wisdom. True wisdom, as Will read to us, is pure, peaceful, gentle, reasonable, filled with mercy and righteous acts. It is not partial or hypocritical. It listens more than talks. With deep humility it does way less preaching and a lot more practicing what it preaches. Wisdom does not seek recognition. It seeks what is good for all children and all of creation. According to James, those are the qualities that constitute a good life.

I want to introduce you one of those women...a women of whom you have probably never heard. Zhang Xianling of China is a former aerospace engineer. Her son was a high school student when he was shot in the Tiananmen Square Massacre. He was an aspiring journalist and he had gone simply to document what was happening there as students occupied the square to demand democracy, freedom of the press and freedom of speech. The protest in Tiananmen Square lasted one month, two weeks and six days and at its height there were about one million people gathered there.

On June 4, 1989, after the government declared Martial Law and sent troops in with the instructions "to use whatever means necessary" to end the protest, hundreds were left dead and wounded. One of them was Xianling's son who had snuck out of the house that morning with his camera and extra film. He was shot in the head and then hurriedly buried by soldiers in a flowerbed. She searched for her son for 10 days before someone unearthed his body and took his corpse to a hospital.

As she searched for answers about what happened that day, she met another mother, a philosophy professor, whose 17-year-old son had also been killed that day. Together they co-founded the Tiananmen Mothers. Their demands are truth, accountability and compensation for the families of those killed. Over the years they have written 37 open letters to their government leaders. They have been harassed, detained and have lived under constant surveillance. In fact, there is even a camera focused on the spot where Xianling's son died. The reason for that is that they want to keep her from grieving publicly. She is undeterred. She says, "Such a great, mighty and correct party is afraid of a little old lady. It shows how powerful we are, this group of old people, because we represent righteousness."

Today we remember those women, young and old who act righteously...whose love requires them to seek justice for all. We have so many examples of women who have taken their hard-won wisdom and focused it outward to include others. Think of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, Mothers Against Drunk Drivers, Mother Teresa, Malala....the list is endless.

I asked Erin to read from the much beloved Love Chapter from 1 Corinthians. I am sure you have heard it read at multiple weddings. What most of us don't know about this scripture is that Paul wrote this poetry to a church that was fragmented and in discord. Corinth was a church of wide diversity. It had members who held high level positions in the city, and it had members of the lowest class. There were Jews and Gentiles, slaves

and free citizens. They came from different ethnicities, genders, age and life situations. Instead of embracing their diversity, they became divided.

Paul wrote this description of love, not to celebrate what already existed among them, but as a call to action. Paul wasn't being sentimental. He was dishing out a challenge. Paul was telling the church at Corinth that real love gets up early with whatever tools are at hand to build a community and create a new world....when you feel like it and when you don't...especially when you don't. Love is tenacious, unconditional, unwavering and doesn't seek notoriety. It rejoices in truth. It is unending. Paul is calling them to a love anchored in the well-being of others.

Most mothers have taken on that kind of love....the kind that requires you to get up early and use whatever tools are at hand....when you feel like and when you don't. The kind of love that isn't based on the other person's behavior but on the good of all. But you don't have to be a mother to love like that.

Have you ever heard of Simone Campbell? She was never married, never a mother. She is a lawyer, activist, lobbyist and poet. She also happens to be a nun. Campbell joined the Sisters of Social Service when she was 18 years old. She is currently the Executive Director of a group called NETWORK, which lobbies for social issues.

I don't know if you remember back in 2012 when the Vatican, under Pope Benedict, put out a blistering rebuke of a American nuns in the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. They chastised them for promoting "radical feminist themes incompatible with the Catholic faith" and for their social activism to the poor. Simone Campbell's group NETWORK was one of the groups listed in that rebuke. So, in response, this group of American nuns planned a bus tour that the New York Times referred to as a "spirited retort to the Vatican." They went to nine states where they visited homeless shelters, food pantries, education and health care facilities. They wanted to give visibility to the work of nuns on behalf of the poor and disenfranchised. It became known as Nuns on the Bus. They have taken multiple bus tours since, focusing on health care, immigration, voting rights, economic justice. They are women of wisdom and love who when rebuked got a bus and took their love-in-action on the road.

Women of wisdom and love are obvious because they aren't focused on recognition or the status quo. They are visible by their uniqueness. I want you to take a moment or two today to think about who these women, these Earth Mothers as Shawn calls them, are in your life. Who are the women who when they speak you need to listen? Who are those women who when they act you need to tag along in solidarity? Who are those women who when they call you out and tell you that you are headed in the wrong direction you need to change course? Who are those women in your life who have taught you to love with wisdom? Those women who birthed something in you and gave you the example of releasing out into the world?

On this Mother's Day we celebrate all those unsung heroines, all those women who scare the powers that be with their righteousness, all those ones who love

extravagantly, who when they are told to sit down and shut up plan a bus tour. We honor them and celebrate them but more importantly we need to let them lead us down the paths of righteousness for the good of all, for Christ's sake. Amen.