

Sermon Text: John 14:15-21

It is difficult to weave Confirmation Sunday, also Ascension Sunday and Mother’s Day together with this particular Scripture reading, but I will attempt to do so, and not only that, but I will weave as my opening illustration something I saw yesterday at the YMCA. I saw that they had a wrestling clinic, a wrestling camp at the YMCA, and it reminded me of a story that happened once when I wrestled for three years in high school. I was the senior co-captain of the wrestling team. In one particular home match, I was having a very difficult time with my opponent, and I kept hearing from the stands, “Boo! You call that wrestling? You’re pitiful!” I was hot, something rare in wrestling, and I called a timeout, and I walked across the gym, and I said, “Mom! What is your problem?” Our moms are not always what we wanted.

Now on a more serious note, a friend’s father died a few years back, and I attended his father’s funeral. It was held in a mill section of Woodruff in a Church of God church. I wasn’t really familiar with what they would do or what to expect, and at one point in the service, many, many friends and family rose to the pulpit to share stories. One friend told of the time that he stood at the door of the family home, and he was going to knock, but before he knocked, he heard the sound of a voice, and he listened carefully, and it was the voice of the departed’s mother, praying out loud, praying for all she was worth, praying for her son, who had been in some trouble, some marital trouble, some financial trouble, and some substance abuse trouble, in fact, the mother took literally the Scripture verse that she was to go into her closet and pray. She had her very own prayer closet, and she had it set up with some carpet on the bottom of the floor for her arthritic knees, and the friend went on about how he heard her constant prayers and she and her faith helped pull her son through, and she did. When she died, that piece of carpet had two deep, deep indentations where mother love and mother faith had intervened long and hard on behalf of her son. Now, folks, I went to that service not knowing what to expect. I did not know the woman at all, and I barely knew her son, whose funeral service it was, but I, I cried. A mother’s love is a powerful thing. A mother’s love, willing to wrestle with her children, to wrestle with her children’s demons, and to even wrestle with God on their behalf, is an awesome thing.

Jesus prayed for the church. He prayed there and then for his disciples and for all those in the future, who would believe, and he prayed for himself, that he would be able to carry through his task, but those in the future who would believe, be mindful, that is us! Jesus prayed for us. Most of you here today might not understand this, but every year in my 24 years in the ministry, it gets harder and harder for me to preach a special Mother’s Day sermon. The reason is because, every year, I become more and more aware that a certain percentage of everyone in the congregation, maybe five or ten percent out there, has some unhealed wounds, and maybe did not have a Godly mother, a supportive mother. Not all mothers are saintly. Not all mothers are compassionate. Not all mothers are there for their children. Not all reflect the love and the care and the compassion of God. I know that. For them, for some of you, today is painful. We’ve all heard the horror stories of neglect and abuse, but that is the minority, and that’s the fact that made

me hesitant over the years to preach empty words to some of you who have no idea what it is to have a caring, compassionate mother, but I've come to the conclusion that the ideal must be lifted up. The ideal of family love, even if you never had it in a perfect way. Who did? The ideal of a mother who prays for children, of sacrificial love, that ideal still holds, and that ideal is still worthy. Jesus prays for us even now. Whether you had an ideal mother or not, the ideal of a Christian mother still stands, still stands. Every generation seems to believe that it arrived here knowing more than the generation which came before, and every generation soon finds out, when they have children of their own, that its pride and hubris were mistaken. The ideals hold even if you had something less. An ideal mother stays connected to her children in a prayerful, spiritual way even when they are long gone from the nest. You know, a long time ago, people used to believe that children took the parents' life force, that the children actually took the parents' life force, and as the children grew up, the parents seemed to decline and diminish and maybe become a little stooped over. That's what they believed. Now that was in pre-scientific terms, and I've got a story that sort of goes along those lines that I like. It's a story about a little girl, who climbed up on the lap of her grandmother, and she looked at her grandmother's white hair, and she stroked it, and she looked at her grandmother's wrinkles on her face, and she felt them, and she said, "Did God make you?" The grandmother said, "Yes." The little girl said, "Did God make me, too?" The grandmother said, "Why, yes!" The little girl said, "Well, don't you think he's doing a better job now than he used to?" My point is this, it may not be scientific, but children will age you.

We're not only to now pray for them going off to camp or going off on some long, cross-country trip, but these days, we pray for our children every day when they leave for school, and for good reason. I read a survey. The top three disciplinary problems in school fifty years ago, you can imagine what they were, those of you in school, fifty years ago, the top three disciplinary problems were talking in class, chewing gum, and running in the hallways. Now, we are told they are drugs, robbery and assault. Mothering will give you wrinkles. Done right, it's a fulltime, lifetime job, not to hold on, you of course push them out of the nest, but you never, ever lose a spiritual, emotional, loving connection. Something happened to me once when I was in a mall on a rare day off. I worked in Myrtle Beach three summers, and I was at Myrtle Beach Mall on a rare day off, just people watching, just relaxing. I heard a tiny girl just scream out somewhere in the crowd of tourists. She screamed out, "Mom!" And this is what happened, women from in their 20's to women way up in their 80's turned in the crowd on high alert, like Bruce Lee in a kung fu movie. Women in their 80's whose children were long gone heard 'Mom!', and something visceral, emotional connected. Mothering, I guess, never ends, and that's a beautiful thing.

I saw a cartoon once. It showed a psychologist talking to a patient, and he said to the woman, "Let's see, you spend 50% of your energy on your job, and you spend 50% of your energy on your husband, and you spend 50% of your energy on your children. I think I see the problem." Moms are usually the emotional center of the family, I said usually, not always, but usually, and sometimes families feel just absolutely lost, bereft,

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when mom is not home. I want to tell you a true story from one of my former churches. At a former church, a young girl, her name was Mary Katherine, called me at the parsonage, her preacher, on a stormy afternoon. It was daytime. She was distraught. She said she did not know where her mother was, and she was home, alone, and scared, and I said, “You’re by yourself?” She said, “Yes. We don’t know where Mom is, and me and David and Stuart and Dad are here by ourselves.” That’s a true story. Mothers are often the emotional center of the family.

Now, if you’re lucky, and you have, or you had, an ideal mother, who was the perfect mix between love and toughness and Godliness, I’ll bet that she was a lot like Susanna Wesley, and Susanna Wesley is worth reading about and emulating. She spent an hour each day, praying for her many children. She took each child aside for an individual hour each week to discuss spiritual matters. Some of her rules for raising children were teach them to pray as soon as they can speak. Another rule was give them nothing they cry for, and then only what is good for them if they ask for it politely. Then commend and reward good behavior, and strictly observe all the promises you made to your children. Mine kind of get me on that one sometimes. Susanna Wesley focused her love on the child who needed it most. She said, “I love the one who is sick until he is well, and the one who is away until he comes home.” God’s love is sacrificial, and so is a good mother’s love sacrificial.

A true story from August 16, 1987, Northwest Airlines Flight #225 crashed just after take off from a Detroit airport. 155 people were killed. One survived. Just one. A four-year-old from Tempe, Arizona named Cecelia, and news accounts say that when the rescuers found Cecelia, they did not believe that she had been on the plane. She was unhurt, just walking around. The investigators first assumed that she had come from one of the cars on the highway where the airliner crashed, but when they went through the registry of those passengers on the flight, they found Cecelia’s name. Cecelia survived because, as the plane was falling, Cecelia’s mother, Paula, unbuckled her own seatbelt, and got, got down on her knees in front of her child, and wrapped her arms and her whole body around Cecelia, and would not let go. She used her last bit of strength to shield and comfort and to save her daughter. She died giving her child a chance to live. That is a mother’s love, but that is also God’s love, and that reminds us of the message of the cross. True love is a sacred and costly thing. For those of you who build things, you’ll understand this allusion, my son Dave brought in a poem of his, “Love is a Load Bearing Word.” From Jesus’ prayer for himself and his disciples and for us who believe later on, we learn a Godly example of love and concern. Now where do we learn what we know about parenting? I’m afraid we learn that from our parents, and some of us have lived long enough to see ourselves repeating our mother’s and our father’s bad habits, and Lord help us because we said we never would. No mother and no father is worthy of emulation at every point, but we do emulate at their worst, sometimes without meaning to.

One of the best comic strips about mother/daughter relationships is a comic strip called, Cathy. Some of you have read that. In one of the comics, the comic strip character,

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Cathy, says to her mother, “I love you, Mom, but I’ll never be like you, I’ll never think like you, I’ll never act like you, and I’ll never look like you.” Mom says, “Oh, I know. I used to say that exact same thing to my mom, and I wound up thinking like her, and acting like her, and looking like her. See! You’re like me already!” And then Cathy runs from the room screaming, and Mom says, “Oh, isn’t that cute? I used to do the same thing.” We become our parents more than we like to think, and it is better to make God in Christ our goal to emulate because less than God is less than God. We even at our best are imperfect. Our mothers, too, stand or stood in need of God’s love, forgiveness, and grace. God’s love and forgiveness, and our love and forgiveness are needed all the way around. Part of what these confirmation parents promised long ago for each child was to live before them in such a way that they learned the Christian faith by actions, real, live actions. Learned it from mother and father, and from Main Street, Mother Church, in worship and Sunday School until they are ready and willing and able to claim the faith for themselves, and they have done that today, and I congratulate them, but I will say, your faith is not mature. You are merely moving in that direction. You have claimed Jesus as your Lord. You have claimed Scripture as your book and God as your God as you enter into choices that will make up the direction of your life. You know, each choice matters just as each turn of the steering wheel on the highway matters. Consider what mother and father would have you do because they have your interest at heart, and consider above all what God would have you do. He wants the best for each of us. Confirmation class, Main Street is your Mother Church, and as proclaimed you, up and on your own faith, and so I ask you to drive carefully. A mother’s love ought to grow us up and out to maturity. God wants for us the same. Growth and maturity, growth and courage, growth and love, and hope and grace for ourselves and for all those who interact with us, that they see those things.

Here’s an old story from my family. My children used to be fascinated by caterpillars when it was the caterpillar season in our backyard. They would catch them by day, and release them by night, and when caterpillar season was over, Allison, my older daughter, started playing caterpillar with Christina, my youngest. Christina is not here so I can tell this story. She’s babysitting in the nursery today. Well, one morning, Allison was methodically stuffing tiny Christina into a pillowcase with soothing tones of, “Be a nice baby caterpillar. Put your feet into the cocoon.” It was early morning, and Christina was half asleep, and Allison was pulling the pillowcase over her. She was just sitting there, sleeping, with a pillowcase on her head. Allison, with her hands and in her best, what I call teacher voice, she said, “And now the caterpillar turns into a butterfly!” And sleepy Christina, this lump in the pillowcase, just said, “No!” Allison persisted, “You have to leave your cocoon, and be a butterfly!” Christina said, grumpily, “Don’t wanta be a butterfly!” Now whether kids or moms like it or not, part of the job we have is to help our caterpillars grow up and get wings. It’s part of God’s plan. And to put away childish things, to grow in faith, and to grow in resemblance to the life that Jesus lived. That’s quite a calling. The ideal mother knows this, too. Garrison Keillor has a part of a poem that he wrote about emptying the nest, and it goes this way. I hope I can read it properly. He said, “Don’t mother birds after some weeks of looking at those upturned beaks deliberately the food delay, hoping to hear their goslings say, What are these feathered,

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floppy things attached to us? You think they're wings?" Mothers, nurturing and then letting go is hard, but God is with you and God is with them. God willing, they will return and bring grandchildren with them. We expect one in August for our family. Confirmation class, your Mother Church has raised you, given you information, accepted your questions, and we've accepted your proclamation of faith. Now, it's up to you to find a way to live faith, out in the world. The supreme example is God in Christ. Jesus wanted us to know that God is like a loving parent. Jesus prayed for himself, to finish what he had to do, for his disciples, and for us who believe so much later on. He prayed because he knew it would be hard, and it is, but remember, no matter what you've done, for most of us, your mother still loves you, and for all of us, God still loves us and is there waiting with open arms. When Jesus was told his mother and brothers were waiting outside the house where he was teaching, he asked once, "Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?" When no one could guess what he meant, he looked at the crowd and he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. Anyone who does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." The church has been like a mother to me, and I am sure for you, too. I know I would not be whom I am today if it had not been for the love and the teaching and the Sunday School and the superintendents of the age levels and all the committees and such and the pastors, who passed through my life. I know I would not be whom I am today without the Mother Church. So, look around Confirmation Class, and look around to each other, and the faces you see are just a few of your many second mothers and fathers and brothers and sisters, too. All these folks, so much more than even family. Each one of us needs this church, needs the second family to become the people God has created us to be, and so, I'll close with Isaiah 66, where the Lord says, "You will be like a child that is nursed by its mother, carried in her arms, and treated with love. I will comfort you in Jerusalem as a mother comforts her child." God as a loving parent. Jesus prayed for himself to complete his task, prayed for his disciples, and he prayed for us. He loves us, and he knew it would be hard, and so pray for yourselves, and pray for all of God's children round you. Let us support one another as we grow in faith. Amen.