

## Sermon: Imperfect Perfection

5/14/17

For Mother's Day this year, someone gave me a pillow with "World's Best Mom" embroidered on it. Of course I was touched. What Mom wouldn't be. But it also opened up a whole Pandora's box of guilt for me because, immediately I thought of all the ways in which I was far from a perfect Mom. I thought of all the times I had been impatient, quick to anger, insensitive, selfish, unreasonable. The list went on and on. And I know I'm not alone in feeling this way. For every warm thought that the lovely cards and sayings promote, there are multiple, multiple, cringe-making thoughts of all the imperfections that Moms secretly confront. I know this because I know lots of Moms and however confident and self-assured some appear on the outside, there are the dark moments, revealed only to close friends, where doubt and fear come to the surface.

This is true no matter what the outcome is. It is true for those whose children appear to be perfect, leading perfect lives, good careers, good marriages, good prospects. And it is more cruelly true for those who, like me, cannot point to perfect children, children leading what appears to be perfect lives, and say "look what I did."

Of course, as we get close to people, we often find that those perfect lives are not so perfect after all, or at least come with their dark sides. The mother who

points with pride to her son the doctor may not reveal that she hears from him, perhaps once a year at the most. The mother who tells you of her daughter's beautiful wedding may not reveal that her daughter's last year was spent in and out of drug rehab. And even without these dramatic stories, there are smaller but still painful stories of rejection and disappointment that haunt us all. I may keep bad company, but I know of no one whose life is perfect. But I know of many who are bedeviled by their feelings of imperfection. Many who have not found a way to come to terms with the contrast between the Hallmark card sayings and the messy reality that is life. The cover-ups that go on around our personal lives make whatever happens in Washington look like child's play.

Now, I happen to be scheduled for the second and fourth Sunday of each month, which means that I always am talking to you on Mother's Day and someone else is always talking to you on Father's Day. I mention this in order to explain that I have nothing against fathers, though it looks suspicious that I have never given a Father's Day sermon. My own father was a wonderful man, though he probably slowed my theological development, because I had no problem with the idea that God would be a benevolent Father, until it was explained to me that this was a trifle sexist. So I understand that Mother's Day is also for people who act like mothers to other people, fathers, aunts, grandmothers, friends, foster parents, adoptive parents, people who take on the role of mother when biological

mothers are unable to do so for one reason or another. I have friends on both sides of this fence, people who have mothered other people's children and people who have been mothered by those other than their biological mothers. Sometimes they are the same person. There are Hallmark cards for such people, cards that say things like, 'This is for you since you've been like a mother to me'. The knowledge that such sentiments exist make us realize that being a mother is biology but it's much, much more besides. For mothers who have not been able to fulfill the role of mother, life is very complicated and often very tragic indeed.

But for those who have children and who continue to mother them, life goes beyond the easy sayings of the cards as well. I know that fatherhood comes with a load of expectations but I think the expectations of motherhood compare to them as a small rise in the ground compares to Mt. Everest.

For one thing, until recently all women were expected to be mothers. Barrenness was a curse. It put a woman outside the community. It was a sufficient reason for a husband to put his wife "aside," as the expression went, aside from the only meaningful roles her community allowed her.

Of course times have changed and women have won a hard fight to be considered as more than reproducers of the community, but it has been a short time, compared with human history, that this has been true and it is difficult to

change our hearts, much more difficult than to change our heads. And so the expectation of motherhood for women is still a shadow on the mind, whatever choices a woman may make to be other than that. It is still something that women confront differently than men confront the idea of fatherhood. For women who have children as well as for those that don't, for women who fear their mothering is imperfect, for women who measure their lives against the ideals of motherhood, this can be a day filled with ambiguity as much as it is filled with joy. For even the most dedicated mother, the expression 'you are only as happy as your unhappiest child' has a good deal of resonance.

This is a day for more than mothers, however. It is a day for everyone since I can confidently say that everyone sitting here has had a mother. There are not many things I can say so confidently, but this is one of them. And so each of us also has to confront ourselves and our lives in light of our mothers. Do we blame our mothers for our shortcomings and disappointments? Do we fear we fall short of our mother's expectations and hopes? Do we see our mother's traits passed down to us, whether we deserve them or not? At different times in our lives, we may see this differently. At times we may honor and idealize our mothers. At other times we may feel we have been shortchanged by her. Many a woman has said before she had children, that she would never say the things her mother said, only to be amazed how her mother's voice comes out of her mouth once she has children. My

mother has been gone for many years and yet she shows up regularly in my house, still.

Mothers not only have the most difficult job in the world, not only are they given a task that is, possibly, the one that carries the greatest load of expectations, forming another human being, but they are also given very little real guidance. There are those books, but those books often feel as much like indictments as help. Who can live up to the job description of perfection? And what are the consequences of failure?

We live in a web of gratitude and resentment, of the desire for closeness and the desire for independence. We are contradictory and finely tuned beings and our care and maintenance is entrusted to a mere mortal, often someone with little experience, someone who, herself, may not have had the guidance and nurturing she has needed to guide and nurture someone else. I can remember wanting to search the receiving blankets on my new baby, hoping that someone had left the manual for this model somewhere in them. Even if, like myself, the lucky woman has had a good example to follow, there are still all the unexpected twists and turns that life can take, things that are often not well covered in the advice books.

And, of course, that never ends. There are not so many manuals on parenting one's adult children, but we don't ever really retire from the job, even when our

children are well into their twenties, thirties, forties, and so on. Problems change. The need for encouragement and love never does.

So here we are, imperfect people parenting other imperfect people, ourselves the products of imperfect people. In our imperfection, we often find ourselves looking at other people's imperfections because our own are too painful to contemplate. We are prone to look at the parental speck in our sister's eye instead of the parental beam in our own. But, in truth, we are all imperfect and, though our children may be perfect in our eyes, chances are they have a little tiny ding or two here and there. How could anyone come up to the perfection demanded by the job of turning out a happy, productive, compassionate, well groomed, dressed and well paid human being? And, if we can't, is this a fallen, broken world inhabited by fallen, broken people? That's the view of many religions but I don't think it's our view.

This is a beautiful world and, for all I may not come up to my own expectations, for all other people may not come up to my expectations, it is filled with wonderful, generous, kind people who try as hard as they can, often under tough circumstances, to be the best they can be. Part of being that best is being the best they can be at nurturing and loving others. We all fall short of some imaginary perfection, but maybe that's a good thing. Just as real flowers have flaws, just as

their petals have spots and holes, are not uniform in shape, there is something about a real flower that even the best crafted silk flower cannot reproduce. So is it with people, people who were raised by mothers who also had spots and holes in their parenting. For one thing, it makes people more interesting than robots or computers or the actors who have their lines written for them. For another, though real people are not as beautiful as a marble statue, our arms slide off hard, cold marble and we prefer the touch of imperfect, living flesh.

Though I can think of a lot of ways in which the world could be improved, mosquitoes come to mind, and I bet you can too, perhaps it is the way it is for some reason that we are too limited to see. Perhaps we are imperfect for a reason and perhaps the imperfect parenting we received or gave is part of the world's perfection.

I know we cannot hold a statue as easily as we can hold each other. Forgiveness and understanding are part of how we become wiser and that includes forgiveness of ourselves as well as others. We have no reason to forgive perfection. I know that the bumps and knots of imperfection are where we can grasp each other and understand each other. They are our handholds. They are our handholds to ourselves, to our mothers, to our children. It is in imperfection that we find the shadows as well as the light, the depth of perspective that makes this a surprisingly

wonderful world. So maybe we are living in a perfect world and we just don't know it. A world with people striving, hoping, trying to be the best they can be, trying to meet each other's needs, hoping to meet their own needs, learning from each other, mothers from children as well as children from mothers, growing from error and incompleteness, developing and finding grace and beauty in the process.

Let us be grateful for our flaws and our dents and bumps and grateful for the flaws and dents and bumps of our mothers. They have made us what we are and we are all part of something that we may think is imperfect but is somehow still holy and good.

I would like to invite everyone to share memories of their mothers.