



CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

SERMONS

"THE MARK OF MOTHERHOOD"

Sunday Morning, May 13, 1962
Crescent Hill Baptist Church
Louisville, Kentucky
John R. Claypool

Scriptural Reference: I Kings 3:16-27

Just this week I heard someone described in these words: "He has a tremendous grasp of the obvious." It was meant to be derogatory, and in one sense it was. But, again, could this be said of everyone? It is often the things that seem most obvious that we least understand. Take the ideal that we are celebrating today, for example. Motherhood is as obvious and familiar as our own names, but just from looking around, does it appear that everyone fully grasps it? I rather doubt it, and therefore today I think I can best honor the occasion if I direct your attention to its central nature.

What constitutes essential motherhood? What is its grand mark? That question was posed for a young king many centuries ago (I Kings 3:16-27). He had before him an exceedingly difficult case. It involved two women who lived together and had babies about the same age. In the middle of the night, one of the infants died, and its mother quickly switched children with her companion who was asleep. The next morning, great confusion developed, for both women claimed the living child. Since there were not witnesses and the testimony conflicted, how was Solomon to distinguish the true mother? Demonstrating the wisdom for which he later became famous, he ordered a sword brought out and suggested they cut the baby in two and give half to each contestant. This was shrewd strategy, for he knew that if either one was a true mother she would reject such a proposal. If both of them agreed to it, Solomon probably thought it would be better to kill the child than to give it to one of such cruel insensitivity. Sure enough, one of the women recoiled in horror, and in surrendering her desire authenticated herself as the rightful mother.

I think this story goes to the heart of the matter. Ideal motherhood is not just the physical act of bringing children into the world. It is a set of mind, an attitude, a spiritual commitment. It is the willingness to subordinate one's own wishes for the welfare of the child. These women revealed their true natures by what they were willing to sacrifice. One would have sacrificed the child for herself; the other would have sacrificed herself for the child. Therefore, we must extend our concept of motherhood beyond a biological process. It is literally a "metaphysical" concept in that it goes beyond the physical. True maternity is a way of self-sacrifice. Thus, some who give birth are not "mothers" in the highest sense and others who are denied the physical power live up to its essence.

One of our very closest couple-friends discovered that they could never have children of their own. So they began adoption proceedings, and patiently moved through that process. When the time came to actually receive a child, they were given the full story on the infant's background. The counselor began by saying: "Now you two are the real 'father' and 'mother.'" We shall refer to those other parties as 'the man' and 'the woman,' for that is the only role they have played. By

taking the responsibility of the child, you are its parents." This thought meant a great deal to our friends, and points up a valid distinction. "Woman" and "mother" are not automatically the same; a person can be related to a child in either role and not be the other. Therefore, let me emphasize that motherhood is a comprehensive ideal. At its best, it is the giving of self to another, the relinquishing of one's own good that the good of the child may be achieved.

If this be the case, then let us admit that motherhood is a difficult and demanding vocation. It is never easy to deny one's self, to set aside personal goals for some outside value. Now this is a point that I think ought to be emphasized when we are talking about motherhood. We sometimes picture their role as simple and painless. We talk about "a mother's instinct" and their "natural capacity," and almost make it sound like what they do is as effortless as breathing. This is certainly not the case. Mothers have instincts, to be sure, but they have to be disciplined like anything else. It is no easier for them to get up in the middle of the night and soothe a crying child than it is for a man. Natural inclinations have to be harnessed in them as in any other human. Therefore, we men do mothers a great injustice if we shrug off their task as a natural ability. One does not wash dishes and diapers and dirty clothes as involuntarily as she breathes. It is as hard to forego pleasures in order to be a mother as it is to forego pleasures to do anything. Thus, let me state emphatically that true motherhood is not easy. It is an admirable virtue because it involves self-discipline. We should not write off "the real thing" as simply "doing what comes naturally." Back of every great mother stands a "Gethsemane and Calvary" of sorts. The surrendering of will and sacrificing of self is always there, and this is not bought without a price. There is no role that makes more personal demands than the role of true motherhood.

Now in every age, mothers have faced the difficulty of self-denial, which is hard enough in itself. But today's mother faces an even greater problem because of the nature of our times. You see, for most of recorded history, women occupied a secondary position and played a private role. The walls of a house marked the boundaries of a woman's opportunities. It was not easy in all these centuries to be a mother, but this was the only alternative that was open. But today that is no longer the case. Since the Feminist movements of the nineteenth century, many possibilities are open to women. They are now given equal education and equal privileges, and all kinds of professional and business openings are accessible. And, in reaction to this former extreme, these outside vocations have gained pre-eminence above the home. I think it is fair to say that modern mother has "an inferiority complex" about her vocation. Here is the glamorous career woman: she spends her time with interesting adults, lives an exciting, changing life, travels extensively, and "keeps up" with what is happening in the world. This makes the life of a homemaker seem very drab - only children to talk to, the same routine of menial tasks, no time ever to read or create. Therefore, although she may never talk about it, today's mother may be like her female ancestor in the Garden of Eden. She looks at "the-tree-of-outside-life" and wonders if she is not missing the better part of existence. She becomes quite dejected with her lot and half-ashamedly identifies herself as "a mere mother" or "just a homemaker." More than one such person has said to me almost bitterly: "I work, all right, but it's at home, so I don't get paid for it or any prestige out of it." This is undoubtedly the attitude of many today, and accounts for the growing number of mothers who are seeking fulfillment outside the home. The inherent difficulty of motherhood is amplified by the feeling that it is a second-rate vocation.

It is to this real and understandable modern attitude that I want to speak this morning. I shall not try to refight the Feminist battles of the last century or debate the merits of home life over against a career. What I do want to affirm is the crucial significance of the mother's role.

While he was president of Harvard University, Charles Eliot said that one of civilization's greatest mistakes was failing to view motherhood as a prestigious vocation. Far from being a lowly domestic chore, it is probably the most demanding of all tasks. Mothers are working with the highest of all values - a human life. They are in the crucial relationship to the child, for in those first few years the foundation of personality is laid. They are preparing for the world its most potent force. We say flippantly: "The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world," but this is so. It is men who affect the life upon this globe, and they are most influenced by those who are with them in the earliest years. If you do not think motherhood is important, ponder this question: what if Adolph Hitler had been born into the home of Albert Schweitzer instead of his own? What if "The Fuehrer" had been influenced by that one who instilled in Schweitzer such a reverence for life and holy purposes? Conceivably the whole twentieth century could have been different. Think of it: the fate of the whole world could have been the difference in two mothers.

Thus, it is a gross misunderstanding to think of this role as minor or unworthy. When God entrusts a bundle of life into one's hands, what could be a greater challenge? The introduction that baby gets to Reality will come through his mother. His loves and hates, his purposes and habits, his goals and values - they all will come through her. If a mother looks at him and says: "I am not equal to the challenge; I do not have the knowledge or the wisdom or the love" - this I can understand, for who of us is adequate for that task? But to say: "It is not enough; it is not worthy of my skills; I would be wasting my talent to do just this" - that I cannot understand. We are sadly out of touch with Reality if our day judges motherhood as something inferior. Listen, people are more important than positions; everything cannot compare to any one; the world is less in value than one soul. Therefore, motherhood is pre-eminent. It is difficult - true. But it is also crucial. However green the "outside pastures" may look - children are more important than careers.

One night a mother of three finally got them all to bed and wearily walked into the den. There to her dismay was a page ripped out of the encyclopedia and torn to bits. She stooped to pick them up, and as she began to make repairs with scotch tape, the anguish of her role bore heavily. "This is all I do," she thought, "Oh, the futility of it all." As she pieced the page together, she noticed it was the picture of a little child. When it was finished, she happened to turn it over and on the back was a map of the world. Suddenly that became a symbol to her of what she was doing. As she was putting together the life of a child, she was also building the world of tomorrow. A misplaced part of that face would have distorted the world, and the same is true of her motherly vocation. The child she builds today will build tomorrow's world.

Therefore, mother, lift up your head. Never speak of yourself as "just a mother" or "merely a homemaker." In terms of real values, you are the VIP's - the Very Important Persons. You do the crucial task with the most precious and powerful value of all. Yours is more than a physical act; it is the highest vocation. Thus it is never easy, but always important.

Mothers, we salute you. This is your day, and you are our hope!