

May 10, 2015

“Love One Another”

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris



John 15: 10-12

If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.'

Nothing says “Happy Mother’s Day” like a new baby! Jon and Kylie Sarley have been attending here now for almost a year and we thank you, Sarley family, for sharing the beautiful Ada Rose with us all this morning as we celebrate her baptism.

There is an old Jewish proverb that says: “God could not be everywhere at once, so he gave each child a mother.” ---and as we well know, that could be a birth mother, an adoptive mother, a stepmother, a special aunt, a grandmother, or in some cases, a really great dad. And to many kids, God has given a loving, mothering congregation, as is this one, for so many kids and youth. The point is, we learn God’s amazing love for us through those adults who live it and make it real in our lives. And this community of love incarnates God’s love for Ada and even long before she can possibly know what it means is showing her how to receive love and how to love others. It’s how we learn how God loves us. As Julian of Norwich put it in the 14th century: “In love God clothes us, enfolds and embraces us; that tender love completely surrounds us, never to leave us.”

On Mother’s Day we lift up mothers of all kinds, all you who live out God’s love and do God’s work in bearing and nurturing and raising up each new generation of God’s people on this earth. Today we honor you and show our love for you and take time to simply pause and reflect and say “thank you.”

The Scriptures of this Easter season keep telling us more things about God’s love as revealed to us in our Risen Lord. It is the love of the Good Shepherd, that love that lays down its life for others, which is, of course, what mothers do, in ways big and small. It is the love that abides in us, as does a mother’s love, no matter what. And this love, you see, raises us up and makes us bold, John says, just like a mother’s love, because it makes us strong and it gives us courage, just like a mother’s love.

Still, it is a new kind of love, this love Jesus commands, for it knows no limits, no boundaries, no color lines, no in-group/out-group. No one is outside God’s circle of love. And so--as one biblical commentator has written: “The new kind of love that Jesus holds out to us might require us to open doors that we have closed against others, to respond to appeals that require total commitment and trust. It is the kind of love with which God loves us, a love that should be the model of the love we have for others. When we examine the demands of this love, we realize just how revolutionary it is and what a change in attitude it requires.”

This morning I want to lift up a mother whose love extended far beyond her own immediate family to embrace children who had been cast aside and deprived of the promise of this land. Mary McLeod Bethune was an African-American woman, born in 1875 to parents who had been slaves. One of seventeen children who worked side-by-side in the fields picking cotton, she got the opportunity to gain an education when a Methodist missionary opened a school for African-American children. She walked miles to and from that Methodist mission school each day. She excelled, received scholarships to continue her education, and became an educator herself, scraping together funds to start a school that grew into Bethune-Cookman University which continues to this day. It is still one of the 119 schools, colleges and universities affiliated with the United Methodist Church.

Mary McLeod Bethune rose to prominence, was honored many times, and served as an advisor to President Franklin Roosevelt on education policy. She became the first president of the National Council of Negro Women and in that capacity attended the founding Assembly of the United Nations in 1949. She was feisty and strong, a mother who found ways to make things happen on behalf of all children.

Towards the end of her life, as she summed up her legacy, she wrote:

“I leave you finally a responsibility to our young people. The world around us really belongs to youth, for youth will take over its future management. Our children must never lose their zeal for building a better world. They must not be discouraged from aspiring toward greatness, for they are to be the leaders of tomorrow. Nor must they forget that the masses of our people are still underprivileged, ill-housed, impoverished, and victimized by discrimination. We have a powerful potential in our youth, and we must have the courage to change old ideas and practices so that we may direct their power toward good ends.”

We Methodists take this to heart in all that we do. It's why we're doing everything we can in this congregation, in our Preschool, and through Upward Bound House to support our families and children. And why we care about all schools. It's why we care about social policies that deal with childcare and education and family-leave and healthcare. It's why we have Sunday School and our youth group. It's why we put so many resources into scholarship support for our kids and it's why we get them involved in mission and stewardship so that they know what it means to serve others.

It's because we know that every child is the most beautiful child on earth. And that every child is worthy of the best this world has to offer. That every child needs to be nurtured in faith and love and taught the best of values and personal and social values. That every child deserves to know the height and depth and length and breadth of God's love. The love of brothers and sisters in the household of faith. The mothering love that knows us each by name and calls us into being the fullness of who we might become. The love that casts out fear and sets us free to love one another. The love that keeps us safe and makes us strong. It is God's gift to us, as is a mother's gift of love to her child. And it is this love that makes all the difference in the world.

Today there is a powerful monument to Mary McLeod Bethune on the Washington Mall. It is a statue of her, holding out a small book My Last Will and Testament which she wrote, to two young children, passing on her legacy of learning and hope. And on it is a quote from her. I offer it on this Mother's Day 2015 as a charge to us all in this time of re-examining our nation's promises to all children and youth:

I leave you love. • I leave you hope. • I leave you the challenge of developing confidence in one another. • I leave you a thirst for education. • I leave you a respect for the use of power. • I leave you faith. • I leave you racial dignity. • I leave you also a desire to live harmoniously with your fellow man. • I leave you finally a responsibility to our young people.

May these words be a guiding light on this Mother's Day as we commit to Ada Rose in baptism and to the fullness of life for all.

Amen.

Notes:

“God's new kind of love” from Diane Bergant, Preaching the New Lectionary Year C. Collegeville: The Order of St. Benedict, Inc., 2000.

Mary McLeod Bethune: Building a Better World, Essays and Selected Paperback . Audrey Thomas McCluskey (Editor), Elaine M. Smith (Editor) Indiana University Press, 2001

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