

## ***WE ARE ALL MOTHERS, INCLUDING YOU***

Matthew 12:46-50

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### **Matthew 12:46-50, NRSV**

While Jesus was still speaking to the crowds, his mother and brothers were standing outside, wanting to speak to him. Someone told him, "Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you."

But to the one who had told him this, Jesus replied, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" And pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."

## ***WE ARE ALL MOTHERS, INCLUDING YOU***

When my daughter Eva was little, one of our many favorite books was "Are You My Mother?" by P.D. Eastman. I don't know whether Eastman considered that passage from Matthew when he wrote the book. In the story, a baby bird starts to break out of its shell, so its mother flies off from the nest to look for food. The baby bird emerges from the shell and asks, "Where is my mother?" Not seeing her, the little bird proceeds to fall out of the nest and begin a search. It finds and asks a kitten, a hen, a dog, and a cow: "Are you my mother? Are you my mother?" The cow responds, "How can I be your mother? Can't you see I am a cow?" The baby bird persists, asking an old car, a ship, an airplane, and a steam shovel whether each of them is its mother. Finally, the steam shovel miraculously drops the little bird back in its nest, and in that precise moment its mother returns, a worm in her beak. She asks, "Do you know who I am?" And the baby bird responds confidently, "Yes, you are my mother."

The baby bird recognized its mother as the creature who returned to the nest with food, the one who demonstrated caring by appearing at just the right moment with something to eat.

I loved this theme because I appeared in my daughter's life just when she needed a family to adopt her, and she appeared in mine at exactly the time that my heart and the nest were ready.

Stretching the book's "Are you my mother?" theme a bit, I'd like to argue that the steam shovel, no doubt powered by a human being, acted like a mother too. After all, it scooped up the baby bird at exactly the right moment and "miraculously" dropped it back in its nest. And the cow, for all its bluntness, helped the baby bird by sharing good, practical information—just like a mother.

In our reading of the Scripture, when Jesus asks, "Who is my mother?" it's easy to imagine a dismissive tone. But he is not dishonoring his mother in this passage, and I'm not saying that just because this is a Mother's Day sermon. True, he does not stop preaching to the crowds to go find out what she and his brothers want. But he would not do that. That action would have indicated that being related to him by blood was more important than following him and his message. How could he do that after instructing his disciples to leave everything behind and follow him? It would not compute.

Jesus has not cast his mother aside. He has expanded his circle to include people unrelated to him by blood, people who love and believe in him and are committed to doing God's work in the world.

We do the same thing when we create a "chosen family." Like Jesus, we don't cast aside our traditional families—at least not unless we must. We choose people who love us and who stretch us by their example and their encouragement to be our best selves—more than our traditional family members can. We enrich our lives by creating a special family of people to whom we feel a deep commitment. We recognize and acknowledge our special relationships with them beyond blood or traditional family connection. To accompany us on our life journeys, we create our own family of brothers, sisters, fathers, and mothers.

When you think of the word *motherly*, what related words come to mind? To explore the idea, I gathered some synonyms for *motherly*: *caring, loving, kind, tender, devoted, understanding, compassionate*. As you can see, those words go way beyond gender identity and societal roles. They extend far beyond having biological or adopted children—or not. They go to the core of who we are: caring, loving, kind, tender, devoted, understanding, compassionate. And when I think of *motherly*, I have to add *strong* and *courageous*.

Those words make me think of many people in our chosen community here at Seattle First Baptist Church.

I think of Joanne Wright. I am grateful for Joanne's devotion, compassion, courage, and tact as she teaches many of us about racism and how to fight it.

I think of Megan and Aaron. We have watched their family expand through their love, commitment, incredible patience, fearlessness, and grace.

I think of Russ and Bruce, whom I honor for the love, patience, and commitment they bring to their lives as Spencer's parents.

I think of Cherry and her incredible gifts as a leader, teacher, and writer, the gifts she shares with us so generously.

I think of Carole Cornell and her loving, consistent ABW outreach to me and others.

Of course, I think of Pastor Tim. In his tender but powerful way, he urges us and gives us tools to recognize and live into our better selves.

I think of Pastor Patricia, who moves us with her frank observations about the way we live our lives. Never pointing a finger, of course, but we know when the shoe fits.

And Patrick Green. Who wouldn't want Patrick in their chosen family? I am grateful for—among a hundred other qualities—his boundless delight and creativity and his love for our children and youth.

Those are just a few people—and there are so many more—who are powerful examples of those *motherly* synonyms. But we are all mothers. Jesus said, "For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and *mother*."

I would like to ask you to think for a moment about a way or a time in which you have been any of those synonyms for *motherly*: *caring, loving, kind, tender, devoted, understanding, compassionate, strong, and courageous*. Maybe the memory will stand out as a time you have intentionally been your better self or intentionally strived to do God's will with the help of your chosen family. . . . Have you thought of an instance?

Now, please find one other person near you, and thank them for being the person they just remembered.

A quote in your bulletin states, "Every action of our lives touches on some chord that will vibrate in eternity." As the loving creatures we are, everything we do matters. Every gesture, every action. When the children around us are small, we can see this principle in action constantly. When Eva was about 3, she would model what I did, no matter what it was. Think about the small children you have known in your lives, and see if you can relate to this situation:

Little Eva and I are standing in the bathroom brushing our teeth, she standing on a stool and me standing behind her with my feet on the floor. I realize that, being a faster brusher than she is, I am going to have to spit over or around her head into the basin. Instead of doing this and risking a mess, I decide to go spit and rinse in the kitchen sink. When I am just about finished in the kitchen, I look up, only to see Eva brushing her teeth while roaming around the living room. “Eva, we don’t walk around the house brushing our teeth. We brush our teeth in the bathroom,” I say, as I stand, toothbrush in hand, in the kitchen doorway, my chin dripping because I haven’t brought a towel with me. Eva looks at me closely, and I know that what I am saying makes no sense to her. What I am doing is what matters. Every gesture, every action.

But this is more than the story of a childhood miscommunication. Adults have the same experience. We watch for and need consistency between people’s words and actions. Here in our church community of Seattle First Baptist I recently experienced a wonderful example of actions matching words. On Tuesday, April 10, about 6:45 p.m. I was sitting on my bed in my homestay in Xela, Guatemala, where Eva and I had traveled to study Spanish. I got a text message from a phone number I hadn’t created a contact for, so I didn’t know who it was from until I read it. It said, “Thinking of you. Greetings from the Circle.” Now these ABW women don’t just call themselves the Friendship Circle—they show it with their actions. When I got that message from Catherine Fales, I was part of the circle, even 3,000 miles away. Although that gesture was very special to me, it was not unusual. It’s the way they are. I feel certain their actions are already vibrating in eternity.

Of course, it’s not just actions. What we say matters. The children and adults around us listen to our messages and shape their thinking through them. Once when Eva was small, she was sitting on my lap and we were talking. Suddenly out of the blue she said, rather darkly, “I don’t like fat people.” I was surprised. I didn’t know where this came from. I don’t remember exactly how we talked about it in that moment. I probably asked her a couple of questions, told her how I felt. I wish I remembered the details. What I do remember is that within two minutes she said, brightly, “Mommy, I *like* fat people.” What struck me about this situation was the dark seriousness with which she made the first negative comment, and the delight, the brightness, of the second comment, the *I like fat people*.

We all have the important opportunity—dare I say *obligation*—to help the children and others around us to have a life of joyful connections with all kinds of people. We see this at work on Sundays during our children’s time. We mothers understand that these are teachable moments. I didn’t say, “Gee my 3-year-old has become a judgmental kid. I can’t believe she said that.” When a child is rambunctious during children’s time, we don’t freeze them in that moment. We don’t label them for

all time as troublemakers. We guide them to a different way of thinking maybe, and we channel their energy when we can.

We need to apply this same principle to the adults around us. I was at a meeting here when someone said something hurtful to the person leading the meeting. I've been in an adult ed class where someone made a comment that showed ignorance of racial realities. It's a huge failure on my part if I fix that first person in my mind as hurtful or the other person as ignorant. Welcome to the club—we all are! We are not perfect! As mothers to one another, we need to remember Eva's "I don't like fat people" moment. If we can, we need to find out what's going on with the person, give them information if they need it, and help them to be their best selves. I ask you to please do that with me when I have hurtful, stupid moments, and I will do my best to love you back.

I share these stories from Eva's early childhood because that's when I saw such clear evidence of touching a chord that vibrates in eternity. When she said to me, "How are you feeling, Mommy?" and "I love you," I heard the echo of my own words and felt blessed and privileged. Now, 20 years later, the chord still vibrates as I see my daughter doing God's will in her own unique way, without thinking twice about it, and without even considering that God exists. I see it when I tell her about one of my small life dramas with someone. She'll say, "Mom, you need to think about that person and cut them some slack. They don't have a problem. You do." Because I'm not a small child, I don't always bounce back with the same brightness she once exhibited. But I do hear her wise words, and I recognize that she is my mother too.

We all have that kind of powerful motherly influence on others, and we share it here in our faith community. When we perform a kind gesture—giving someone a ride, asking about their sick friend, pouring them a cup of tea when they arrive late and stressed out by traffic, joining them in a pew or at a table—we nurture them with our motherly love. When we take courageous actions—speaking up, showing up, making commitments—when we nurture all God's children—not just our own—we inspire and serve as role models for others. These gestures and actions touch a chord that will vibrate in eternity.

It's one thing for all of us to think about ourselves as mothers and to enjoy recognizing how much good we have done for the children, youth, and adults around us—to think about the "I love yous" we've planted and reaped in others. But often it's another thing to think about our own mothers, especially on this day. I grew up in the 1950s and 60s, and my mother never said "I love you." Is that story familiar to you? My parents never hugged me—until they were much older and I forced hugs and "I love

you” on them. They came to expect and delight in them. But because my parents never hugged me or told me they loved me, as a young person I thought that was normal.

Some of us were blessed with lovely, wonderful parents. But for some of us, our parents—and our mothers in particular—may have been a disappointment or a challenge to us because of expectations that they could not live up to. I remember when I told my mother I was going to adopt a baby as a 43-year-old single woman. She said, “That’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard.” That’s the moment when I wanted to ask, as Jesus did, “Who is my mother?” I definitely wanted another choice, and I turned to my chosen family for support.

Sometimes it helps to get a new perspective on these not so nurturing motherly behaviors. I got some help with that. One day—this is before Eva was born—I was complaining to a friend about my mother, about how she was so unsupportive and disappointing. Counseling me, my friend suggested an alternative reality for me to try on. She said, “That woman is not your real mom. Your real mom was abducted by space aliens and has been circling the earth for years in a spaceship. The woman who is acting as your mom has been taking care of you all these years, but she is not your real mom.”

Then she said, “Tell me about your real mom.” I loved this idea, and I got right into it: “My real mom—she’s wonderful. She is very loving. She cares deeply about me. She’s smiling down at me from that spaceship. She is proud of all the difficult things I have done. She is sending me constant encouragement.” For a time, I was very excited about my “real mom,” and sometimes when I was thinking about an issue in my life, I asked myself, “What would my real mom say about this?” (It’s an alternative version of What would Jesus do?) I know it may sound crazy, but it worked for me to think about her and her loving feelings toward me.

Before I say any more about my spaceship mom, I need to say that my real mom, who died in 2007, did come around from her “dumbest thing I ever heard” comment. When I brought Eva home from Guatemala, my mom and dad met me at my front door, having flown from Florida to Seattle just days before Christmas. She showed up, and she was a good Grandma Lou. I must not freeze her in time. Like all of us, she evolved as much as she could with the life experiences she had.

And gradually my understanding of my spaceship mom evolved. You see, my spaceship mom was God. She was a loving presence who accepted, loved, and cared about me. For me, having a spaceship mom and coming to understand her as God took the pressure off my real mother. I stopped expecting my mother to do and be things that she could not. I didn’t need her to be perfect. Thinking now of my spaceship mom, I want to tweak the Scripture one final time: “Whoever does the will of my *mother* in heaven is my mother.”

We don't need our real mothers to be perfect, although it is terrific when they are. We have our chosen families. We have each other. We have people in our lives who are caring, loving, kind, tender, devoted, understanding, compassionate, strong, and courageous. These are our mothers. We are our mothers. We have God's love all around us. Given the supportive community that surrounds us, how can we not do God's work in the world?

Jesus asked, "Who is my mother?" The baby bird asked, "Are you my mother?" When we look at our community gathered here today, we have the answer. Are you my mother? Yes, you are. Happy Mother's Day!