
Our Broken Hearts Now "Burning within Us'

**A sermon by the Rev. Thee Smith, Priest Assoc.
Atlanta, GA**

In the name of God: Our Maker, Defender, Redeemer, and Friend; Amen!

It's Mother's Day! "Thanks be to God' for all mothers: mothers and grandmothers; first-time mothers and young mothers; for matriarchs and matrons who are mothers; for step-mothers and mothers-in-law; for godmothers, surrogate mothers and even "to borrow a term from the Men's Movement" even for "male mothers.' Thank God for you all" or as we say here in the South "God bless your heart, *all ya'll.*'

Now, whenever I think of what to say on Mother's Day I confess I'm reminded of a few witticisms; clever and funny sayings that are also revealing" revealing about how key mothers are for all of us. What first comes to mind is that blues line by singer B.B. King:

Nobody loves me but my mother, and she could be jivin' too!

Now that one bears repeating; and remember, it's from a blues song!

Nobody loves me but my mother, and she could be jivin' too!

Of course, what's so interesting about that line is the element of doubt. Even if I'm not sure my mother loves me, it *matters* if in fact she doesn't love me!

Another witty line about the importance of our mothers came to me by way of a former parishioner who is also a therapist. In her office she kept a pillow cushion that had the following sentence stitched on it. The sentence rhymes with the proverb, "If it's not one thing it's another,' and reads, of course:

If it's not one thing, it's your *mother.*

Now I admit there's an element of negativity here in the idea that our psychological issues trace back to our mothers" particularly if they are bundled together like a knot that you can't find the beginning or the end of. But again, making fun of that complexity shows how key our mothers are to us; in this case, key to our mental health and development as whole persons.

Finally, I think it was Carol Burnett's TV comedy show where I first heard this last joke about the centrality of mothers in our lives and in the life of our families. Maybe you know it too:

If mama ain't happy, *ain't nobody happy!*

Now, I know that at this point it sounds like I'm slamming mothers. But that's not my intention. My real goal is to point out how important mothers are to us" to all of us, and to do so in a way that reveals why we laugh. We laugh, I propose,

because it gives us comic relief from the exaggerated way we regard our mothers.

For, after all, most of us start out in life with our mothers being godlike entities to us. Mothers are our first goddesses of nurture and consolation, even blessing us with joy and bliss" or else depriving us of these. And now here's the actual goal of my reflections: noticing how the religious life involves extending that godlike power beyond our mothers to a Power that really can sustain all of our concentrated expectations.

For sooner or later we all learn the truth about our mothers; they really are just as human as we are. Of course they can no more bear all our exaggerated expectation than we can bear it ourselves when people expect absolute power from us. But because we have invested so much adoration and expectation in our mothers, when we realize they are merely human, it can come to us as a shock and disillusionment.

Disillusionment with our mothers is perhaps our earliest experience of disillusionment, for which our later experiences, for example disillusionment with God" are only aftershocks, however seismic. Perhaps this "'ground zero' of disillusionment, occurring so early in life, leaves us so broken-hearted that it opens up an abyss of grief; an abyss that we nervously back away from with jokes like the ones we just heard.

Nobody loves me but my mother, and she could be jivin' too.

If it's not one thing, it's your mother.

If mama ain't happy, ain't nobody happy!

And on and on like that.

Now, right here, let's notice a similar magnitude of grief and disappointment described in today's gospel. But in the gospel there's a flip side of disillusionment and broken-heartedness" what the text calls "'our hearts burning within us.' First of all, in the story two disciples are walking on a road lamenting their most recent experience of disappointment and grief.

It is a seismic magnitude of disillusionment and broken-heartedness, as they disclose to a stranger whom they encounter on the way for, they confide, "we had hoped that [this Jesus] was the one to redeem Israel."

Yes, and besides all this [they elaborate further], it is now the third day since these things took place . . . [and] some women of our group . . . [who] were at [his] tomb early this morning . . . when they did not find his body there . . . came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive . . . [but] some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said . . . but they did not see him." (Luke 24.21-24)

Now precisely here we can virtually feel the pull on the disciples to anesthetize their disappointment by doubting the reliability of the women's testimony. Perhaps that tone of doubt is a first step toward the kind of jokes that I related earlier" a strategy for relieving ourselves of disillusionment. (By the way, consider here the anti-resurrection arguments that we have all heard. I wonder if they are also ways of buffering us from the disappointing possibility that resurrection from the dead just might not be true" or rather most probably is not in fact true.)

However in this case the stranger intervenes; intervenes with an authority so masterful and grace-filled that the two disciples later remark to one another,

"Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?"

This is as if to say, "We knew there was something amazing happening when he was talking to us about the scriptures; we just didn't understand what made him so different."

That was my own experience some forty years ago as a college student. I can still vividly recall sitting at a kitchen table learning the gospel from the woman I came to call my "mother in-the-Lord" or my "spiritual mother." Day after day I sat listening to her, just as the disciples had listened so often before to Jesus and particularly in today's gospel.

On the one hand my spiritual mother blended the gospel with her own story; with her personal experience of suffering and failure. However her stories of negativity also included abundant evidence of the good news that God had redeemed and overcome all of that.

For example her own son had contracted childhood cancer and should have died according to the medical diagnoses of that day. But she told me how diligently she had sought charismatic healing for him and now he was one of my best friends in college—a living miracle like those performed by our Lord in scripture.

On the other hand, as she was telling me stories like that verbally she was also breaking bread with me every day—over tea and salad and lunch and snacks; that is, she was also sharing herself and her hospitality with me day after day. In fact an observer once described me and other youth whom she evangelized around her table as straws sucking life from her.

Now I'm sure we could imagine an even more unflattering image! But I prefer this holy image from the Eucharistic hymn, "Now My Tongue the Mystery Telling" (Pange lingua; The Hymnal no. 329, v.3 :). In that hymn we affirm the mysteries of the sacrament of Eucharist or Holy Communion (where of course we re-enact Jesus at the Last Supper giving his disciples bread and wine and identifying them as his body and blood), and at the end of verse three we sing:

Then more precious food supplying,

He gives himself with his own hand.

In other words my mentor became my spiritual mother by means of both word and sacrament—through both personalized Bible study and the closeness of table fellowship.

And like the two disciples in today's gospel I found myself saying, "Was not my heart burning within me?" as I heard her declare the good news that God takes account of our suffering and reveals God's glory through it—not by preventing that suffering but by navigating and mediating it.

And also: Was not my broken-heartedness—my heart already broken as a twenty-something year-old college student—healed of its brokenness as she "broke the bread of life to me," and in that way shared her faith and life with me; as it were, like a mother, feeding me with her own hand?

Yes, that's how she became my mother in-the-Lord, by brokering for me the kind of Emmaus Road experience that we hear about in today's gospel story. The two hinges of that experience are word and sacrament; the verbal word that "[it was] necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory," and the sacramental reality of her "giving herself with her own hands" in a similar way as, "when [Jesus] was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them." (Luke 24.27, 30)

And now here, Christian friends, on this third Sunday of Easter we find ourselves at the heart of the Paschal Mystery—the word, "paschal" means suffering; here we are at the core mystery of God's suffering love; the mystery that it is God's infinite capacity for suffering love—not ours but God's—that triumphs over sin and death and brings new life from the dead, because God is the eternal source of life itself.

So it is praiseworthy in our mothers, but also a limited capacity, that we experience in their suffering love for us, when we have had them nurture and care for us and "'soldier on' with us throughout the challenges of our lives"'if indeed they were able in any way to mother us adequately. But there is an infinite capacity for suffering love that we discover in God, when we are mature enough to fathom it. For God alone experiences the collective totality of all the suffering and sin endured by all human beings "'from the foundation of the world.'

Indeed that is what our faith affirms in atonement theology, that an abyss of suffering and sin was concentrated, mysteriously somehow, in the crucifixion of Jesus; but then just as mysteriously dissolved through his Resurrection from the dead. It is there, in the combined Cross-&-Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, that God alone "'triumphs' over all that (Colossians 2.15).

And now, may you receive this benediction as I offer it on behalf of all of us. The Lord be with you. [And also with you.]
Let us pray.

May your broken heart be burning within you, as you expect to receive Christ in sacraments of Holy Eucharist or table fellowship;

and may this risen Lord be known to you in the breaking of bread, who shares his resurrection life with us;

and may you experience his "'real presence' among us, the Body of Christ, in and through and beyond all suffering; that he is thus "'giving himself to us with his own hand.'

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.