
Love Calls: Mother's Day, Bonhoeffer and The Good Shepherd

A sermon by Canon Wallace Marsh

Scripture calls us to honor our fathers and mothers. Today, we honor our mothers and give thanks for their lives and the sacrifices they made for us. We remember those mothers who are not present this morning, whether it is because of distance, an illness, a strained relationship, or because they rest upon a greater shore and in a greater light. Today, we honor, remember and give thanks for our mothers.

When I was Lay Chaplain at Sewanee, I remember sitting in a small group with The Rev. Dr. Christopher Bryan, author and professor of New Testament. We were discussing the first miracle in John's gospel, where Jesus turns water into wine at the wedding in Cana of Galilee.

Dr. Bryan spoke up and said that miracle was one of the most important and overlooked passages on the theology of the incarnation. There we were, with a world-renowned New Testament professor making these claims. We were on the edge of our seats! Dr. Bryan had the room's attention. He stroked his beard, closed his eyes, and in his very British accent said, "One of the things that makes the incarnation so real and so true is that even Jesus got annoyed with his mother."

You remember the story: When the wine ran out at the wedding, Jesus' mother finds him at the party and says, "They have no wine." Jesus' is annoyed and responds, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." (Kids, calling your mother 'woman' in public will not go over well).

Jesus learned something that day: When mom wants something done, mom wants it done now, and she isn't going to debate it with you. Thus, Mary simply turns to the servant and says, "Do whatever he tells you." We all know how the story ends: Mary gets her way; more wine appears at the wedding ... perhaps too much wine.

So, on this Mother's Day, it is helpful to remember even Jesus loved and got annoyed with his mother!

Later this morning, Dr. Charles Marsh will be in the Dean's forum talking about his new book on Dietrich Bonhoeffer. It is an amazing story about a great theologian who died in a concentration camp three weeks before the end of WWII.

As I read the book, I am struck by the presence of Bonhoeffer's mother in his life. As a child, his mother, Paula, was the person of faith who insisted on hymns being sung and scripture being read at the home. Even after Bonhoeffer had two doctorate degrees, he would send his mother books written by Karl Barth, and they would correspond about Barth's theology. Paula played an important role in the formation of Dietrich's faith.

Yet, one of the wonderful things about Marsh's book is that Paula is depicted as mother. Dietrich is constantly writing his mother about what he needs—"Mom, it's hot in Spain, I need more summer clothes. Mom, it's cold in New York, please send me some winter clothes."

It just goes to show, even if you are a brilliant woman and your son has two doctorate degrees before he is 25, there are some things about motherhood that remain constant—Mom, I need your credit card!

Motherhood is the lens by which we should read today's gospel.

Throughout history this gospel has been used in a number of different ways. In Bonhoeffer's day, the church cited it in the Barmen Declaration, a statement that challenged Hitler's authority, reminding Germany that Jesus is Lord! Yet, during that same period, readings like this were used against the Jews. People said the Jews hadn't entered through the narrow gate, so horrendous evils were inflicted upon them.

This famous passage is so often taken out of context that we forget the opening verses of John 10 are really a continuation of a conversation in John 9.

So what happens in John 9? Jesus is walking and he comes upon a man born blind man. He spits on the ground, takes the mud and places it on the man's eyes and says go wash in the pool of Siloam. The man washes and is suddenly able to see! The neighbors and religious leaders are in utter disbelief. They question the man—"Were you really blind?" They question the man's parents—"Was he really born blind?"

Finally, the man born blind has had enough of the interrogations. He says, "Here is one thing I know, I was blind and now I see ... Furthermore, never since the world began has anyone ever opened the eyes of a person born blind. This Jesus is from God" (paraphrase John 9: 24-34). At that point the religious leaders have heard enough and they take the man born blind and throw him out of the city!

Here is what I want you to remember: When Jesus learns the man has been thrown out of the city, he gets angry with the religious leaders, and launches into a speech about spiritual blindness. The beginning of today's gospel is a continuation of Jesus' response to the religious leaders.

Jesus is saying, my followers, my disciples, those who see me, those who hear my voice need not fear. Don't worry about being kicked out of the city or about losing everything. I am the gate. I will provide life and provide it abundantly!

Motherhood is the lens to read this gospel, because it is a passage about grace. It is about unconditional love, something mother's display every single day.

Grace on display—Jesus opens the eyes of the blind. Jesus' voice provides comfort in our pain and direction when we are lost. Jesus provides nourishment when we are hungry, and like a shepherd, Jesus even lies across the gate sacrificing his life so that we may have life.

Like the man born blind, when we experience God's grace, when we recognize the depth of God's love, when we understand that nothing separates us from the love of God, our eyes are opened and our lives are changed!

On this Mother's Day, I am thankful for my mother. She has her faults, but she loves me unconditionally. There are many moments where I did not deserve her love (if she were here, she would tell you about those moments), but her love has never left and I believe it never will. While my mother has been annoying at times (yes, teenagers, that is a part of it), her love has given my life direction and is an example to follow as I raise my son.

In the same way, God's love calls us follow the example and the voice of the Good Shepherd.

Love calls us to follow. Love calls us to speak when others are silent. Love calls us to love what others deem unlovable. Love calls us to act when no one is standing. And like Bonhoeffer, love might even call us to bear the ultimate cost of discipleship.

Following will not always be easy, because loving isn't always easy, but remember what scripture says, "There is no fear in love. Perfect love casts out all fear" (1 John 4: 18).

Today, I want you to remember God's love ... see it, hear it and follow it ... because Jesus says there "we have life and have it abundantly!"

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