
*“As truly as God is our Father, so just as truly is he our
Mother”*

A sermon by Canon Cathy Zappa
Easter 5 – Year A

I would understand if the quote I just cited took you by surprise. For one, you’ve been paying such close attention to our service so far, that you know that it didn’t come from the scripture lessons we’ve read or the hymns we’ve sung already. But, I assure you, it *is* in your bulletin, and you’ll hear it shortly in our liturgy.

In fact, here’s a fun challenge to liven things up a bit—a scavenger hunt! See if you can find it, before I tell you where it is.

Another reason this quote may have surprised you is that, while we’re used to talking about God as father, we’re not so used to the idea of God as mother; though there’s plenty a precedent for it in the Bible.

To name a few, in Deuteronomy, God is the mother who bore and gave birth to Israel.^[i] In Hosea, God is the mother who taught Israel to walk, led them with bands of love, and held them in her arms.^[ii] In Isaiah, God is variously a mother in labor,^[iii] a mother nursing her child,^[iv] and a mother comforting her child.^[v] Elsewhere, God is compared to a mother bear^[vi] and a mother eagle;^[vii] and Jesus compares himself to a mother hen gathering her brood.^[viii]

There are many more images, metaphors, and titles for God, which stretch our imagination and remind us that God is not defined by any single one of them. “As truly as God is our Father, so just as truly is he our Mother.”

By now, you have found this in your bulletin, so you know that it’s our communion anthem, and the words are by Julian of Norwich.

Julian was born in 1342 in the bustling English town of Norwich. We don’t know much about her early life. We don’t even know her real name: she has been called Julian, because she was an anchoress at St. Julian’s Church. This meant that she lived in an enclosure attached to the church, where she prayed and provided spiritual direction. What we do know of her is from what she wrote about a series of visions she received, when she was deathly ill.

She lived during a particularly tumultuous period in European history, marked by famine, bubonic plague, the Peasants’ Rebellion, the beginning of the 100 Years War, and the destabilization of the papacy and other trusted institutions.

In light of all she’d seen and experienced, it’s quite amazing that she could still hear and believe God’s promise that “All shall be well;” and still trust that God’s meaning is love; and that in this love he works everything toward good; and in this love, our life is everlasting.^[ix]

One of the many ways that Julian imagines this love is with the metaphor of God—even Jesus—as Mother. “This fair, lovely word ‘mother,’” she says, “is so sweet and so kind in itself that it cannot truly be said of anyone nor to anyone except of

him and to him who is the true Mother of life and of all. To the quality of motherhood belongs natural love, wisdom, and knowledge—and this is God.”[\[x\]](#)

“We have our being,” she continues, “from Jesus Christ, our true Mother, where the basis of motherhood begins, with all the sweet protection of love that accompanies it endlessly.”[\[xi\]](#)

You notice that she refers to our Mother God as “he,” which suggests that this isn’t about gender; and it’s not a statement about which gender, or which parental role, is the closest reflection of God.

Rather, it’s a reminder that we are all created in the image of God—that we all reflect Jesus—male and female alike. It evokes the unity—the wholeness—of God, who knows what it is to be mother and father, as well as parent and, in Jesus, child; and who is the only perfect Mother, and the only perfect Father.

Yes, God is the only perfect Mother, and the only perfect Father. This can be a great relief, and enormously healing.

How many of us labor under the illusion that we’re supposed to be the perfect mother or father, and believe that we should be able to meet every one of our children’s needs, and berate ourselves or feel guilty because we can’t—or feel judged when our children fall into difficulties?

And how many of us, as daughters and sons, still hold our mother or father responsible for whatever isn’t right in our lives? Or have been unable to forgive our own parents for falling short—for failing to give us the bottomless, unconditional love that we wanted (and still want!) from them?

As a mother myself, Julian’s teaching helps me be gentler and more forgiving with myself for all the ways I’m not the perfect parent that I so want to be. And as a daughter, it helps me be gentler and more compassionate toward my own parents. And more grateful, too, for what they *have* been able to give, as human beings like myself, and all of us, who are still learning to love and be loved.

This is easy for me, because I really did—and *do*—have good, loving parents. But I’ve known plenty of people who did not. This teaching can be healing for them, as well. It assures them that they still have a mother, or father, who loves and protects them and will not leave them.

Carol Lee Flinders writes about this in her book *Enduring Grace*: “The healing balm that Julian offers in her teaching on the motherhood of God is that we need not grieve that our relationships here on earth are less than perfect. Life on earth is, after all, inherently flawed. Nonetheless, the rich promise that the maternal relationship holds out can finally be realized, because the mother we long for, and the mother we long to be, is within each of us,”[\[xii\]](#) for God is within us.

God is present in these broken and beautiful relationships—in *all* our relationships—and blesses and grows us through them. But no human relationship can save us; no human being can satisfy the longing we have for God and the love and mercy that only God can give us. They do, however, give us a taste of that grace and, if we let them, draw us back to the God who gives us life; who teaches us love; who is “the reward of all true desiring”; and who promises that “all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well. Amen.”[\[xiii\]](#)

[\[i\]](#) Deuteronomy 32:18

[\[ii\]](#) Hosea 11:3-4

[\[iii\]](#) Isaiah 42:14

[\[iv\]](#) Isaiah 49:15

[\[v\]](#) Isaiah 66:13

[\[vi\]](#) Hosea 13:8

[\[vii\]](#) Deuteronomy 32: 11 - 12

[\[viii\]](#) Matthew 23:37; Luke 13:34

[\[ix\]](#) Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love* (Paraclete Press, 2011), Reading 194 – 195

[\[x\]](#) *Revelations*, Reading 146.

[\[xi\]](#) *Revelations*, Reading 142.

[\[xii\]](#) Carol Lee Flinders, *Enduring Grace: Living Portraits of Seven Women Mystics* (HarperCollins, 1993), 97 – 98.

[\[xiii\]](#) Communion Anthem; *Revelations*, Reading 194 – 195.

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