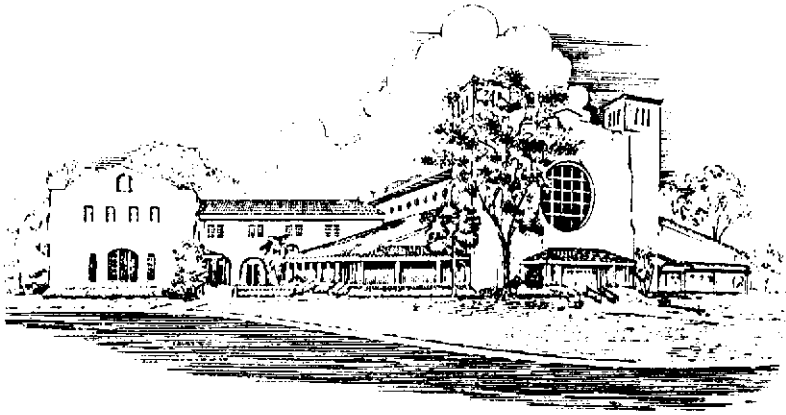


First Church Pulpit

"IN PRAISE OF YOUNG MOTHERS..."

Text: "Proverbs."

— 31:10-34



FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Each Mother's Day I take my pulpit time in slightly different ways to honor that precious gift of motherhood. Normally I am thinking about my own mother, the mother of my children, some mothers of the friends I grew up with, and whom I know now. Today, however, I want to broaden and deepen it, and then narrow it a little bit, and concentrate on what I have called "Young Mothers".

Originally, Mother's Day was developed for older mothers, in gratitude for the gift of God, and the leading light of their faith. Two years ago I told you the story of Annie Jarvis in Philippi, West Virginia, who for fifty years fought to have a Mother's Day, and in the end she won. In 1914, Woodrow Wilson declared an official Mother's Day. I think Annie and her daughter would approve of my emphasis today.

I have selected five little stories to tell you, followed by a little sermon. The theology and the Scripture are imbedded in the stories. I hope you catch it as we go.

(I)

It could be repeated ad infinitum.... I am thinking about a particular young woman whom I know, unnamed, and she does not live in Fort Lauderdale. My sermon is in praise of her. For a detail of reasons that are unimportant here (every marriage break-up has a multitude of reasons), she watched her marriage dissolve in a couple of years; and she did not know what to do.... Possibly they married too young. That is often

true. Possibly they did not work at the marriage. Maybe he drank too much. Maybe they never understood the goal. Maybe they never evaluated what marriage was before they started, or what they each wanted. At any rate, her mother received a phone call in a city far away, and the conversation went something like this: "Hi, Mom". "Yes?" "I cannot stand it here anymore. May I come home, and bring the baby?"

Now, the mother was a single parent too, with other children at the home. But, of course, she said (Not without a gulp, I guess): "Sure, come on." And she did. Now, you have to give a lot of credit to her mother too, who did not have any spare change, and no extra room. The last thing she needed was someone else with a baby in the house to take care of, right? I mean, to be honest. But when your children need help, you try to give it to them, else you do not deserve to be a parent. Every mother does a lot of difficult things trying to help her children.

Well, at any rate, when she got there, you could guess what happened. She had to get a job, of course. She had no money. She had to pay a babysitter. Finally, she found a day care center which was the cheapest of the good ones around. Then she had to get some nice clothes, because after all, she had to look presentable at the office (Are you with me?). The difference between her paycheck and all those little bills, including keeping the car going that kept breaking down, was just about enough, so that like many young people, and older

ones too, she lived from paycheck to paycheck, and almost made it every week - almost, but not quite.

And then, as it often happens with children, the young child became quite ill, and had to go to the hospital, and have surgery and other treatments. Doctors have to make a living, so I am not complaining, but huge doctors' bills began to arrive, and other bills too. The hospital threatened to send the bill collector, and she was living from paycheck to paycheck, what was she supposed to do? Hmmm?

All of that put a lot of pressure on her, and she began to search: "What could God be doing to me? All I ever wanted was to get married and have a family, and live happily ever after...and now, I can't even sleep at night!" And she was at an age, when she should have been out having fun, and fellowship, and excitement....

Well, I want you to pray for her, and all the others like her in the land, across the world, really...for young mothers who, for reasons unimportant here (I don't want you to blame them, I don't want you to blame their husbands), I just want you to pray for those who struggle week to week, paycheck to paycheck, morning to night, trying to be good parents. That is the first story, and while I dodged it here and there, so you would not try to figure out who it was, it is true.

(II)

Now, a second story of a younger parent.

Turn the page. This woman is not quite a younger parent any more, but there was a day when she was. She is a little older now, but at one time, she was a very young mother. Prior to that, she won all the prizes in high school and got straight A's in college in chemistry, and I think was valedictorian of one of the finest schools in the northeast. And except for a few little difficulties in what we used to call "deportment" (They don't use that word anymore, do they? Let's say she had an independent spirit), she was a perfect daughter and a good student, popular, pretty, bright.

When she graduated from college, she went to work. A couple of years later, as young women tend to do (young men, too), she fell in love. One moonlit night she said "Yes", and they got married. After their European honeymoon, home they came. She went to the office, cleaned it up, took her things, and went back to the house to be a full-time wife; and then, in time, the mother of three children. Her husband went to work, as husbands did and do. He made a decent living. She chose, as did he, together they decided that she should devote herself wholeheartedly to her children. They now have nine grandchildren, every one blond and perfect as far as I know, so the family marches on.

I asked her once, around the time her mother died, if she ever minded minding the children, while he was off making big waves in the big wide world, she having given up what no doubt could have been a marvelous and successful career. Everyone agrees now she could have run the

family company. She was honest with me. She said: "Sure, I minded. There were days when I almost went crazy; days with no one to talk to. Tom would come home exhausted from his work, or his travels, and all his conventions everywhere. I would feed him, and then the children, and I would bathe them and put them to bed. We said our little prayers, and I would tiptoe in, trying not to wake my sleeping husband, and then I tried to go to sleep. Of course I minded.... Many times I would far rather have been doing something more exciting than just being wife and mother." But then, she smiled, and said: "But when I see my children and grandchildren now, I know that it was worth it, and I would do it all again."

"Anyway", she added, "playing tennis and golf is not all that bad, and now I have time for my church, and philanthropic endeavors, and to read a lot when I choose to. And," she finally said, "female vice-presidents of Dow Chemical are few and far between, and I'm sure they have their problems too!"

I want you to pray for, and thank God for the mothers who gave up careers which could have been quite exciting and enjoyable, so that they could rear their families. God bless you, if that is you. I've had two of them in my life, my wife and my mother. I would not trade either one for anyone and all the rest combined.

(III)

(3) There is a third group of young mothers, which I will represent with a

young mother named Mary. She is thirty-two, I think. She has two children, one boy, one girl, both blond, one six, one four. Her husband is a rising young stockbroker with a major brokerage firm. She, as he, was near the head of her class at a large state university you would recognize, where they met eleven years ago. Then, they got married, decided to have children four years later, by which time both of them had success in their careers. You know the story.... She took maternity leave to have each of the children, but hurried back to work as soon as she could, to develop her career. Her mother kept saying: "You should not do that. You should take care of the children." We'll come back to her.

They manage an almost steady babysitter. Mary drives the boy to school on her way to work. She worries that if something were to happen during the day, there are times when she cannot get away. Her husband helps with the evening chores (most of the time, anyway). He takes care of the children on Saturdays, unless someone asks him to play golf. Sundays, they spend the day together, unless he decides to fish.... I asked her one day how she felt about this full-time double career. She said: "Sure, it bothers me. Sometimes I am so exhausted I don't know what to do. Once in a while I feel guilty.... But I'll be around a long time after the children are gone. And with both of us working, we can afford private schools, which we believe in. We can have great vacations. We are building a nice retirement, and the time we spend together with our family is quality time."

My sermon is in favor of young parents, who now or then chose, or choose, to pursue joint careers as homemakers and in the office. There was a time when I would have preached the opposite and said: "You women stay home and take care of your children." Many preachers, and husbands say that still. But we need to live in our world, right? and not one from the past. I want you to pray for those who have that double burden, and if you know one, praise them in person sometime this afternoon.

(IV)

There is a fourth young mother I want to tell you of. We shall call her Annie, for that was her name: Annie Campbell, born in County Down in Ulster, Northern Ireland, near the border, about 1875, on a farm named Ballygorian. Her mother died suddenly when she was thirteen. She came to this country with her brother, as many Irish people did back then, to carve out a better future; and, as many did, she went to Pittsburgh to join the Ulster conclave, and joined a little Irish Presbyterian church near Crucible Steel Mill on Smallman Street, where Dr. Harry Marlin was the pastor. (In time the baby who was to become my father was named for him).

She married at age seventeen, then, in quick succession, eight children came along. Talk about young parenthood! All eight were sons, the fourth and fifth of which were twins. Can you imagine what she felt when the midwife said: "We not only have one more boy, Annie...we have two!" But since one of the twins was my

father, I am rather happy that it went that way.

She then went on to bear three further sons, Alex, Tom, and Samuel. During those twenty hurried years, all she ever did was carry, and care for children. Eight sons, from 1895 to 1913! Her husband Thomas went to work, and brought home the bacon, while she did everything else. She cooked; she mended; she scrubbed and canned; she tended the garden. She made candles; she set the winter fires.

I never got to ask her what she thought about it. No doubt she grew weary, hmmm? No doubt she kept shedding tears and casting her thoughts back to Ulster, where her father, Red Davey Campbell lived. He never remarried, by the way; never left the farm, and never saw Annie again.... That had to hurt! The whole Cromie family are thick as thieves.... And then, following the birth of her eighth son, eight days later to be exact, something dreadful happened, as it often did back then. Some infection, no one I know knows for sure, but they wheeled her away on a horse-drawn carriage to Columbia Hospital in Wilkinsburg, and there she breathed her last.

Her next to eldest son (the eldest died in World War I) told me she was a marvelous mother, wife and woman. He wished I could have known her. Everyone loved and adored her. Thomas went on to raise his sons alone. He never saw another woman either, and as soon as the youngest son was old enough, he went back

to Ireland where, after celebrating one night at the County Fair, walked home in the rain, caught pneumonia and died.

Annie Campbell Cromie, my grandmother, was a "young mother" all her life. She gave up everything. She never lived to see her children grow up, and never saw her grandchildren, or her great-grandchildren.... It makes me want to weep when I think of how much some mothers gave and give, and never got to enjoy the fruits of their labors. Annie died at thirty-eight. This sermon is in praise of mothers who never got to see their sons and daughters grow up.

By the way, I hope you'll have the opportunity to read the article on "Mother's Day Memories" in today's Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel's "Sunshine Magazine", written by John Dolen, a member of our church, who is here today - a beautiful writer. He tells what happened when his mother died thirteen years ago at the age of fifty-nine...how every year at Mother's Day he wants to buy a card, or send a present.... In our church, when we sang her favorite hymn last year, he was reminded of her. "He walks with me and he talks with me; And he tells me I am his own; What joy we share as we tarry there, None other has ever known...." That was her favorite hymn, and John writes in the article, that is his Mother's Day gift to her.... I want you to pray for all the mothers and grandmothers, who never get to see the success of their grateful children.

(V)

There is one final young mother I want to talk about. She was not in this sermon until yesterday. Then, as it were, God spoke to me. We'll call her Mary, because that was her name. At age fourteen, in the middle of the night, an angelic visitor came and said: "You are now with child, Mary".... Her engaged husband did not believe her. He wanted to put her away, until an angel told him: "Hush now, Joseph, that child she bears is a child of God. His name will be Jesus."

About to deliver, she was taken eighty miles south on the back of a donkey. Then, there was no room at the inn. Down in Egypt, her son's life was threatened every moment. Then, when she needed him later on, off he went to preach, running up and down the countryside.... She went to see him one day, the Bible says, and he said: "I don't want to see my mother." And finally, she sat there at the cross, and watched him die....

Be in praise of young mothers who, every time they bear a child, bear a child of God.

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for our mothers. Set it right between us all, carrying on the love which God first shared through them, that we may be worthy of the love which has been given us through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.