

John 16:16-24^{New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)}

Sorrow Will Turn into Joy

¹⁶“A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me.” ¹⁷Then some of his disciples said to one another, “What does he mean by saying to us, ‘A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me’; and ‘Because I am going to the Father’?” ¹⁸They said, “What does he mean by this ‘a little while’? We do not know what he is talking about.” ¹⁹Jesus knew that they wanted to ask him, so he said to them, “Are you discussing among yourselves what I meant when I said, ‘A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me’? ²⁰Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy. ²¹When a woman is in labor, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world. ²²So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. ²³On that day you will ask nothing of me.^[a] Very truly, I tell you, if you ask anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you.^[b] ²⁴Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete.

May 10, 2015

John 16:16-24

Jesus, Our Mother

The warnings have gone out broadly to pastors this week, and with good reason. Please, dear God, they begin... Don't be "that church" on Mother's Day. You know the church, the one that deliberately makes mothers and grandmothers stand to be recognized, that hands out flowers to those who have heard the "high calling" to motherhood, and sanctifies the mothering role with perfect splendor regaling tales of the first Mother's day and how awesomely important it is not to forget to call your mother - today. The schmaltz can get pretty thick.

We're not going to do that. In fact, I'm typically loath to even identify a holiday in church if it's not a specifically Christian one. And no, the Fourth of July isn't a Christian holiday either. These designated days when we are supposed to specifically honor mothers, or fathers, or teachers, or administrative assistants, or veterans, or even pastors, are perhaps at best, an opportunity to give someone that we care about our heartfelt thanks. But I find that's not always the case. Sometimes these non-religious holidays do more than stir up false sentimentality or guilt. They also dredge up old wounds – particularly for the ones meant to honor parental roles. No parent is ever perfect, so there's that. And sometimes the desire to become a parent can be unmet, or ruminating about a lost child so painful, that this holiday is one better left unmentioned. But now that I have opened that Pandora's Box, let me try to explain where I'm going with it.

I opened the whole “Mother’s Day” box in order to open up a much bigger box. What I really want to talk about is something else I’m not supposed to mention, and that is that Jesus is fully comfortable in using feminine imagery – childbirth imagery to be precise – to help us understand the nature of the love of God. Maybe it’s not quite as taboo as it once was to consider that God has both Fathering and Mothering qualities. But I remember being a young adult with just a year or so of seminary experience, when a beloved pastor who was like a grandfather to me told me that I would be absolutely 100% wrong to talk about God as anything but “Our Heavenly Father.” That was an opinion I heard often throughout my seminary days, though now, it almost seems ridiculous to me to have worried about it. The Bible, as I read it, affirms so many images for God that limiting it to just one is what seems like the ludicrous proposal.

I’ve also learned a broader church history since then which includes the mystics, the men and women of deep faith who used all kinds of passionate and ecstatic images to describe how they perceived God’s tremendous love. There are a few out there that might make us blush, even in today’s context. The women imagined their marriage to Christ, and the men talked openly about spiritual union with the divine. We just don’t talk that way about God so much. We keep God distant and aloof – most of the time. The only time we allow for Jesus’ suffering is on the cross. We forget that he was a real person, with real feelings, and the ability to connect those feelings to just about any audience that he met. He spoke deeply about God’s love, and he expected us to be able to plumb to those depths ourselves.

The text from John’s gospel that I read this morning doesn’t show up in any of the lectionary readings of the church, and I suspect that it’s not a particular favorite of non-lectionary reading Christian churches much either. It puts the narrative of Jesus’ death, resurrection, and appearance to the disciples in a challenging context for those of us who are less than comfortable

with the language of childbirth. Jesus says this crazy thing to his followers, “A little while, and you will no longer see me; and again in a little while, you will see me.” His disciples are perplexed, and rightly so. They’re not playing a game of hide and seek with Jesus as “it.” He’s obviously opening up big news – and they question each other about it – so they don’t look dumb asking in front of Jesus. But he sees their dismay, and tries to explain it again in another way so they will understand. This time, as he foreshadows his own death and resurrection, he compares the narrative to a woman experiencing labor. Her time comes. It’s painful, excruciating maybe. But the joy that proceeds from this pain makes her forget what her body just went through.

Now that’s an interesting way to describe resurrection. Jesus understands something about what midwives try to tell first time mothers. There is a kind of forgetting when it comes to the pain. My two children’s birth stories are different – painful in their own ways – and joyful in many others. I could tell a few stories, as women do about the births of their children, and the pain I could describe is a pain that no longer has any hold on me. Jesus is both midwife and birth mother of this resurrection story. He helps us understand what is to come, and then he is willing to suffer agonizing pain, even to death, to see us again on the other side with new life. As such, he compares his great feat of love with the same great feat of love that women around the globe accomplish EVERY DAY to bring new life into the world. He sees the extraordinary in the ordinary, and then shows us how to do the same. This isn’t just about birth-mothers either. In a number of ways we all will experience the same kind of transformation in our own lives - the transformation of pain into joy, of suffering into renewal. It may happen through childbirth, it may not. It may happen because of a literal death, or it may come through the death that lets go of what we once were for something new and more authentic.

What Jesus does in giving us this metaphor for understanding his journey is to strip away the sentimentality and give us something real. The resurrection is not some impressively impossible magic trick, yet it is a miracle just the same. An ordinary miracle! The turning of winter into spring just isn't enough, but the intensely emotional experience of birth has its mirrors in the experience of death. It is dangerous, the outcomes uncertain, the change in relationships obvious.

Like I said, we don't talk about this much. It's not in our polite religious vocabulary to do so. The mystics were far less concerned with propriety and much more concerned about getting the word out about this amazing love God shows by crossing from the heavenly realm into the very mortal realm we live in. In Jesus, God was born human. In Jesus, God died a human death.

It certainly sounds strange to our ears, but Julian of Norwich, who had ecstatic revelations about God's love and Jesus' passion for humanity explains it like this, she writes:

"It is a characteristic of God to overcome evil with good.

Jesus Christ therefore, who himself overcame evil with good, is our true Mother. We received our 'Being' from Him and this is where His Maternity starts And with it comes the gentle Protection and Guard of Love which will never ceases to surround us.

Just as God is our Father, so God is also our Mother.

And He showed me this truth in all things, but especially in those sweet words when He says: "It is I".

As if to say, I am the power and the Goodness of the Father, I am the Wisdom of the Mother, I am the Light and the Grace which is blessed love, I am the Trinity, I am the Unity, I am the supreme Goodness of all kind of things, I am the One who makes you love, I am the One who makes you desire, I am the never-ending fulfilment of all true desires. (...)

Our highest Father, God Almighty, who is 'Being', has always known us and loved us: because of this knowledge, through his marvellous and deep charity and with the unanimous consent of the Blessed Trinity, He wanted the Second Person to become our Mother, our Brother, our Saviour.

It is thus logical that God, being our Father, be also our Mother. Our Father desires, our Mother operates and our good Lord the Holy Ghost confirms; we are thus well advised to love our God through whom we have our being, to thank him reverently and to praise him for having created us and to pray fervently to our Mother, so as to obtain mercy and compassion, and to pray to our Lord, the Holy Ghost, to obtain help and grace.

I then saw with complete certainty that God, before creating us, loved us, and His love never lessened and never will. In this love he accomplished all his works, and in this love he oriented all things to our good and in this love our life is eternal.

With creation we started but the love with which he created us was in Him from the very beginning and in this love is our beginning.

And all this we shall see it in God eternally."

From "Revelations of Divine Love" by **Juliana of Norwich** (1342-1416), (LIX, LXXXVI).

Julian's mixing of pronouns, her attributing of motherly characteristics to Jesus may sound weird to us, and yet, Jesus compares his own story to the stories of so many mothers when he talks about bringing new life, eternal life, ...abundant life into the world. Jesus, Our Mother? It may not be my first go-to image when it comes to prayer, but I plan to let it work on me. The surrender to whatever pain may come our way is an inevitable sacrifice of parenthood. It's experienced in friendships, and romances, and other kindred relationships too. And yet, allowing the kind of love into our hearts that can wound us is also how we let in the joy. In Jesus' blessed name I pray. Amen.