



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

You are Enough The Sixth Sunday of Easter 5/9/2021

I speak today as a sinner to sinners, as the beloved of God to God's beloved, as one called to bear witness to those called the bear witness. Amen.

When I was in college, I had a girlfriend whose parents truly, truly despised me. They did not like me at all. They didn't like the way I came along, they didn't like the fact that I was interrupting their family dinners. They didn't like the fact that I was taking away their daughter. They didn't like the school I went to, it wasn't good enough for them. They were all Harvard people and they considered the university I attended, Brown University, to be a safety school. They did not like me at all. And I tried my best to somehow convince them that I was a good person.

One time my girlfriend's father was working in the garden. He had taken on a project that was way beyond his abilities. He had gotten these huge railroad ties that he was trying to make into some kind of raised bed garden. And I drawing from my background in construction, came in, I showed him how to do it. I got everything lined up. I put it up for him and he invited me to dinner. I thought this could be the change. It wasn't the change. He still did not like me.

One parents' weekend college, for reasons that I don't really understand, my girlfriend's mother invited my parents over for tea. I knew this was going to be a power play. I knew this was going to be one of those moments where my parents would walk in and they would see that they were not worthy of this family, and politely tell me to try to pick someone else.

So I tried to prepare my parents and I found out that only my mother could come. And so I tried to prepare my mother and say, get ready for this, Mom. These people are very waspy, very preppy people. You might want to shop at Talbots. Just be ready for this. A lot's riding on this, Mom. I'll never forget, she chose to meet me at the girlfriend's house. And she came in and she was wearing this skirt that was polka dotted. It was not preppy. She had not bought it from Talbots, but it was an amazing skirt. It had a kind of black background and on the front, it had these smoky gray polka dots.

It was her way of saying that she was a working woman. My mother was not a stay-at-home mom. She was a working woman. She worked for a living and she came dressed professionally. There was this tense conversation during the tea in

which there was a kind of mapping of who we were and who my mother was as she explained her work and what she did, and that she worked for the family company and she did construction. She was the comptroller, which meant that she had to make sure that the bills were paid, and that the invoices were sent, and that contracts were honored and kept. It was not an easy job.

And at the end of that tea, she turned to me and she said, I really was going to try to wear something preppy. I did shop at Talbots. I liked the store, but I realized that that wouldn't be me. And in that moment, I realized that she was someone who I didn't know as well as I thought. I realized that she had something to teach me that I didn't know. My mother was a working woman. My father traveled for his work. His absences were both excused and inexcusable. He liked guns and girls, and he enjoyed spending his time away.

My mother was not a nurturer. She was not able to nurture well because in part she worked for a living and would spend long hours in the office. Often I was left at home fending for myself for much of the day after school. In many ways, my experience was a kind of harbinger and foreshadowing of the work that so many of us do now, so many mothers, so many women. The lessons that I learned from her were sometimes difficult.

When this girlfriend that I liked broke up with me, I was devastated. I called her up and I explained what happened. And she said, honey, my first husband came at me with a knife. You'll get over this. And so I did. And when I met my present wife, Claire, the love of my life and mother to my children and wonderful person, my mother approved, even though they have never quite seen eye to eye. She approved because she knew that Claire loved me.

And my mother would often call me when I was a little boy and she was trying to make it home for dinner. And I remember that I would be told step-by-step how to get the supper started. Take the large pan, put it on the stove. Turn the stove up to six. Be careful. Put oil in the pan, crush the garlic, get it going. I'll be there in a second. And she would come and make dinner.

Now, I say all this to you because I've been struggling with something when it comes to Mother's Day. And that is that for years, I have struggled with the thought of whether or not Mother's Day belongs to my mother. On Mother's Day, we tend to lift up motherhood and we tend to define motherhood very, very, very narrowly as this capacity to give nurture. And it's often defined, if you read on Facebook, the posts by those who have a kind of in the lane moment, when it comes to Mother's Day, that it's about notes and lunches and carefully packed presents and all of these things.

My mother did none of those things. She could not nurture me. Her life was too difficult. The traumas that she had to endure, the marriage that she had to survive, these were all challenges. And it wasn't until a few years ago that I

realized that it was all for me and my brother. She stayed with my father because she wanted to have a stable home. And that was a sacrifice of her dignity, a sacrifice of her time, a sacrifice of her very self. And she worked because that was her way of maintaining some independence. She was a smart woman, a brilliant woman. She could have done more, but instead she stayed out of loyalty to her family and because it was a stable job, she sacrificed for me.

And there has never been a goal or standard that was too high for me. So my mother did not give me nurture, but she believed in me more than my father. She believed that I could do more. She expected more. When I had a cousin of mine who won a MacArthur genius grant, the first words out of her mouth was why didn't you win the MacArthur genius grant? I said, well, it's hard, Mom. I'm in the field of religion. I'm not sure if they give it out for that. And she said, well, you just have to apply yourself more. Her standards were incredibly high. And I realized in retrospect, that it's because she believed in me.

Now I say all of this to you again, because I want to lift up this question of whether or not Mother's Day is for her. And I say this because so many of us these days, at least if I listen to all the people that have been speaking to me, so many mothers have had a similar kind of doubt in their mind. They have not been able to do everything perfectly. This has been during this pandemic a time in which mothers have had to balance being mothers and keeping the house, and also keeping themselves employed and also being full-time teachers. And it's been exhausting for so many, even if there are incredible rewards.

And so to answer the question, I'd begin. I want to say that Mother's Day is for my mother and Mother's Day is for every mother who has given herself, because love is not defined in terms of nurture. It's not defined in terms of the motherly virtues we hold so dear, and that enshrine. I believe that motherhood comes when it is read through the lens of the love of the gospel. And it is in Jesus Christ that we have a kind of image of love that every mother takes on when she gives herself.

And we only have ourselves to give, we cannot be anything but ourselves in a loving relationship. We can only teach what we know. We can only go on what we've learned. We can only work out of our experience. And if my mother couldn't be the stereotype of a nurturing mother, she gave me herself and that has to be enough.

Now all of this goes with the grain of our gospel today. In our gospel today from John, we have this wonderful moment where Jesus picks up on an image of a new commandment that He gives earlier in the gospel. And He says, "This is my commandment, that you love one another, as I have loved you." And he says again, to "abide in my love." What does it mean to love one another? It means to give ourselves as imperfect people, as people who are constrained and perhaps

even traumatized. People for whom it's hard to be emotionally available. It means giving ourselves to another.

And what does it mean to abide in Christ's love? The Greek word for abide, *meno*, it means to stay, but it also means to wait. It also means to hold. It also means to survive. So when Jesus says, "Abide in my love," He's saying to stay in those love relationships. He's saying to wait upon the love that is revealed because oftentimes we don't know love, except in retrospect. It means to wait and to heal and to survive because love itself is victorious. We read earlier in one of our readings that the victory of God is faith, but faith is just love enacted.

So today I want to say three things that I want to hold up for you. And then I want to share with you some images of art that give you some idea of what I'm trying to say, and maybe helps you hold it together and then I'll be finished. And the first thing I want to say is that God's perfect love is given through imperfect people. So for those of you who are imperfect, love anyways, because Christ came into this imperfect world so that love might be the transforming power that changes it and brings it into God's own being.

The second thing I want to say to you is the imperfect, all too human love we share becomes perfected by grace because we have only ourselves to give. And at the end is the grace of God that covers and makes room and holds us as we go forward.

And the third thing I want to say, for all the mothers who have been challenged this past year, for all the mothers who fear that they are inadequate to the task of mothering, today I want to say you are enough. God will use the love you give with the love you have received. God will use this love and make it by God's grace into a sacrament.

The first piece of art that I want to share with you today is a poem. Oh, I've already got this piece of art up for those of you who are watching at home. So I'll begin with this. The first piece of art is on your bulletin and it's by Jamini Roy, which is a wonderful Indian artist. This is a piece of art that is in the United Nations and it's called *Mother and Child*. I thought of it because of course we were dealing with a time in which India is experiencing such incredible trauma and such incredible challenge with the COVID-19 pandemic.

And this piece is so powerful because you can see in it a mother who is both alike and different from the child she is protecting. The key here is not the skin tone, but the eyes, because the child's eyes are trusting and the mother's eyes are wary and suspicious and protective. This is not a nurturing mother, but this is a mother who's willing to give her life to protect her child. And that is what we celebrate on Mother's Day.

And the second piece of art that I want to lift before you today is a poem that a parishioner wrote and posted on Facebook, Don Warwick. And one of the privileges of my life was when I was able to walk with him as he said goodbye to both of his parents and came to terms with the fact that like me, we both had complicated relationships with our parents. And this is a poem that Don wrote on the anniversary of his mother's birthday.

Mom, you were young and sweet
And vibrant and loving
And sensitive and vulnerable
And tearful and sometimes dramatic
And distant and quick tempered
And difficult and apologetic
And complicated and increasingly frail
And in pain and sometimes numb to pain
And tough and brave
And frightened and slipping away
And lost and gone
And now you are but a memory
I love you

This day in which we give thanks for mothers know that you are enough. Look for the grace that is revealed in imperfect relationships and remember to abide.