

*Mother's Day
Order of Service –May 12, 2019
Violence, Vulnerability, and a Mother's Love*

Musical Prelude

Greeting -- "Our Deepest Desire" and a Mother's Prayer for Peace

1st Hymn: Peace in Our Time, O Lord, Green 303

Readings -- Hosea 11: 1-4, John 21:15:19, Jean Vanier

2nd Hymn I Need Thee Every Hour, Green 190

Joys and Concerns

Musical interlude

Prayer -- A Prayer for Peace

3rd Hymn: All Through the Night, Green 213

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Introductions/Announcements/Afterthoughts

Postlude

Greeting:

Good morning Friends. Happy Mother's Day.

I begin with an adapted poem by Miriam Pederson: "What Is Our Deepest Desire?"

To be held this way in our mother's arms, / to be nestled deep in the warmth of her body, her gaze, / to be adored, to overwhelm her with our sweetness. / (Perhaps) This is what we seek in chocolate, / in the food and drink and drugs (of all kinds) / that stun the senses, that fill the veins... —can it be, perhaps, / a heavy pang of longing to be (held) / close, close to the heartbeat of our mother?... When the old woman, small and light, / can be carried in the arms of her son, ... / he sees his face in hers / and draws her to him, / rocking to the rhythm of her breathing. / This is the way to enter and leave the world.

for our time together this Mother's Day, let's accept this poet's hypothesis. that the deepest desire of people everywhere is to be loved, to be cherished and held in the condition of utter vulnerability with which we enter and leave this world. Let us suppose that this common longing to be loved carries hope for peace between the world's people, which is the hope that began the celebration of this day, when Julia Ward Howe wrote in 1870:

Arise, all women who have hearts...! We, women of one country, will be too tender of those of another country, to allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs. From the bosom of the devastated earth a voice goes up with our own. It says: Disarm, disarm!

In fellowship with the tender-hearted, the mothers, the sons, the children who take up arms in schools, the voice of the devastated earth, and people everywhere who long to begin and end our lives in love, let us lift our voices in song: ***Peace in Our Time, O Lord, 303.***

Readings

Hosea 11: 1-4 When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols. Yet it was I who taught the Tribe of Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like mothers who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent my head down to them and I fed them with my love.

John 21:15:19 *When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me ...?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs."* ¹⁶*A second time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep."* ¹⁷*He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt to be asked a third time, "Do you love me?" And he answered again, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep."* ¹⁸*Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go."* ¹⁹

Quote from Jean Vanier. He founded the L'Arche community movement more than 50 years ago in France, in which mentally disabled core members share daily life and spiritual community with non-disabled "assistants." Today there are L'Arche communities in 38 countries. Jean Vanier died this week.

We don't know what to do with our own vulnerability and weakness except hide it or pretend it doesn't exist. So how can we welcome fully the vulnerability and weakness of another if we haven't welcomed our own weakness? ...There are some elements despicable in ourselves, which we don't want to look at, but which are part of our natures...Accidents and sicknesses are the reality. We are born in extreme weakness, and our life will end in extreme weakness... But human weakness and vulnerability enable us to form real connections. ...people who are vulnerable, who experience their anguish and pain openly, are at the core of communities. In their vulnerability, they call everyone together. Over time, we all come to discover our own brokenness and fragility, realizing that "they" are also "us." ...Somewhere the deepest desire for a soul is to be appreciated, to be loved.

Second Hymn: I Need Thee Every Hour, Green 190

Prayer

Oh God of Our Deepest Desire, God of our Weakness and Need. We come to you today, every day in need. We need to be loved. We need to learn how to love. We need peace, peace for the lonely, the neglected, the faltering, the devastated earth cries out in need of you. God of the tender-hearted, of the sons and daughters, the mothers and fathers, out of our great need we pray together for peace. And we know the sons and daughters, mothers and fathers of other countries ~ North Korea, Russia, Iran, Venezuela, Yemen, Israel, England, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, the foreign places of our own land ~ also gather in thanksgiving, praise, and deep longing, with deep need to be loved. we know they too lift their faces and hands to the sky and pray for peace. We know all over the world people kneel, and bow, and touch the earth, common ground of our being. All over the earth humans feel the ache and loneliness of so many other species dying, of children arming themselves, all of us needing love. Oh God who is Father and Mother, One who Holds All the Prayers, hold us. Bend low to us now. Lead us with chords of human kindness. Guide us with bands of love. Peace in our time, Oh Holy One, we pray, let it be so. Let it be. Amen.

Benediction

Let it be that we are made in the image and likeness of a vulnerable God, who loves us with the tenderness of a mother.

Let it Be that Peace is Possible.

Let it Be that we hear the cry of the devastated earth to disarm.

*Let it be that we know our deepest desire
To love and be loved,
in our beginnings, and when we end.*

Message

One of the ongoing conversations I have with my sons is about the use of violence, the role violence, and the myths of self-justifying and redemptive violence. George and I have tried to give our boys tools to deconstruct and critique the often invisible and unquestioned dominant cultural narratives around violence, and to help our sons feel empowered to choose something else. Violence is one way to exercise one kind of power, I instruct them. It should be used sparingly, I say, but unfortunately, it's often used first, and all too often. Yes, mommy, they answer, we know, as they wrestle, punch, pummel, command imperiously, demand compliance, compete endlessly with each other, and concoct elaborately creative play scenarios almost always centered around the use of violence, threats, or coercion, with legos and stuffed animals and cars and blocks and sticks and rocks and pillows and string and really anything within easy reach.

I am watching Cyrus, who is 11, on the cusp of adolescence, and has always been tender-hearted, self-conscious, and a deep thinker, navigate the ways that the boys at his school police one another for whiffs of sensitivity and vulnerability. He says boys are different one-on-one than they are in a group, that in a group making fun of each other, daring each other to be reckless and mean, and putting each other down for weakness is the norm. One on one, though, he reflects, more sensitivity is allowed. In a group, they will be on both the defensive and the offensive. One on one they can be disarmed. For his part, Caz, who is 8 and barreling through life both scrappily armed, and with his heart on his torn and grass-stained sleeve, channels the balance of demands on his developing sense of male selfhood by saying, when I express my dismay that all the plots of his play revolve around violence, "don't worry, Mommy, the guns don't shoot bullets, they shoot poop!"

So, my sweet little boys are growing up. One day, God willing, they will be men. 11 years ago, I gave one of my first messages here at Poplar Ridge on Mother's Day, a little over a month after Cyrus was born. In that message, I said that the insight I had gathered from my first month of motherhood was that the vocation of mothering required equal measures of endurance and cherishing. It was a role that was both taking everything I had to give, and it was something that was already so clearly a precious short season of my life, a season that would be past before I knew it. The early days and years of motherhood cannot be sustained forever. It is hard work. And at the same time, it is so precious. I already knew after one month that I would both need it to be a finite season, and that I would want it to last. Endurance and cherishing in equal measure. And Here we are 11 years later. I've discovered as the mother of sons who will be becoming men in a time of great crisis for our country and for the community of earth, that mothering creatures who

grow up, up, and away takes a kind of fortitude that is more like faith and trust than raw strength...and that giving life to beings who insist on having their own lives is a kind of power much more like that found in vulnerability than that wielded through violence.

Images and symbols of the mysterious, holy power of vulnerability, and of vulnerable LOVE are woven throughout the Bible. One such place is where God appears, as in our reading from Book of the Prophet Hosea, in the First Testament, as a mother. In that passage, God sounds like a worried, anguished mother of teenagers making risky choices, remembering them when they were toddlers, and how she patiently taught them to walk, led them toward their freedom, called after them as they went away from her. The more she offered her presence and love, the further away they went, but she remembers, how she held them close, how she healed them, and they didn't even know that it was she who had done so, what she had given, how she bent low to feed them, guided them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love, brought their beloved faces to her own, touching their soft cheek to hers, nourishing them with her love. Now, having taught them to walk, they have. Away. Out of her embrace, out of her safekeeping. Mothering is like that. Love is like that. It is not safe. Love, in fact, makes us very vulnerable. Anyone who has loved, a child or otherwise, knows this. Knows that love risks pain, and heartbreak. God -- like a mother, -- loves, and we love -- anyway, despite the risk. Jean Vanier observed, *If, (as the Gospel of John asserts,) God is Love, then God is terribly vulnerable.* And I see a resonance with this kind of vulnerability of God as love, God as a mother of beloved mortal creatures -- cherished, nurtured, set down in freedom to walk away, out into the laboratory of love, into the lavish beautiful peril of Earth -- I see a resonance between that vulnerability and the undefended, disarmed love of both Mary, the Mother of Jesus, and in Jesus himself.

What if God is vulnerable? What if the way God loves us makes God vulnerable? What if we are made in the image and likeness of such a God? What if the archetype of the Sacred as a mother, and the template of the life and death and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, point us toward a message about the transformative, holy power of vulnerability?

As both Jean Vanier and the poem with which I began our worship today observed, human beings are made to begin and end our lives in frailty, weakness, and complete dependence. We are made to enter and leave this world with a deep vulnerability, a total need for care. To love and be loved in our condition entails a willingness to embrace our inherent vulnerability, and to turn toward the certainty

of grief, and pain. It is a risk, yes, and it appears to be the only one on offer, if we are going to love.

In the passage that we heard from John today, which concludes that gospel, and so is the last we hear from Jesus in all the books of the gospels, Jesus asks Simon three times, do you love me? It can sound like a confrontational challenge, but I think it is a very vulnerable question. The last time we hear Jesus speaking before his death, he is asking plaintively, Do you love me? It's a question that exposes. It's needy, and undefended. It could be taken by the one who hears it as an opportunity to be vulnerable too, an opportunity to connect, honestly, heart to heart. To consider his feelings, to undefend and disarm, for a moment. Yes, of course I love you, Simon answers, three times, a little irritated, maybe a little impatient, a little hurt, put on the spot. Stop asking me, I said I love you. whenever anything is repeated three times in the Bible it's a message to hearers that they should listen up, and it's important. So three times God in Jesus asks Simon: Do you love me? and three times Simon responds in the affirmative, and Jesus says, well, then take care of those who need to be taken care of, give care to the vulnerable and the defenseless, if you love me. And then he goes on, *"truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go."* He's asking for love, and then talking about tending and feeding sheep and lambs and then he says this thing about belts and getting old. What's the connection? The connection, Friends, is vulnerability.

I work with elders. When they were babies their mothers dressed them, carried them, taught them to walk, and watched them grow, cheered them as learned to walk on their own, learned to fasten their own belts, and one day, waved goodbye, as they set off, going wherever they wished. For decades, after the beginning of their lives when their mothers did it for them, these elders were able to fasten their own belts and choose where they wished to go. But now they are old, and many of them stretch out their hands, and very often it is someone else who fastens their belts around them, once more, and takes them, whether they wish to go or not. Very often it will be their grown children, mothering them.

In this passage so close to the end of John, Jesus seems to understand that love connects us to the essential vulnerability of our condition -- a condition he shared with us -- and yet that essential vulnerability also, somehow, makes love possible, makes giving and receiving care, possible. In our love and frailty is a strength we don't really understand, a power that is the opposite of the power of violence. It's

the wisdom in weakness. It's the possibility of transformation. It's the hope for disarmament, the wonder of connection, which is the only way we know who we are. It's the tender hearted boy learning to walk, to fasten his own belt, to head out, away from his mother, wherever he chooses...becoming a tender-hearted man, who comes back home one day to mother the old woman his mother has become. It's his gift to someone else, perhaps his own children, of the opportunity to be tender with him, to care for him, when his own end comes. It's the way to peace in our world, the longing cry from the bosom of the devastated earth. And it's our deepest desire.

I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like mothers who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent my head down to them and I fed them with my love.