

A MOTHER'S LOVE

Happy Mother's Day! To those who are mothers, and to all those who have a mother – which is all of us, isn't it – Happy Mother's Day!

When I was a kid, my sister and I used to laugh at the times we'd go to the Zoo with our mother. We'd be standing in front of an animal cage with a particularly ugly baby – a baby warthog or something, and her comment would usually be, "That baby has a face only a mother could love."

Even the most imperfect of mothers loves her children, doesn't she? – whether the child is adorable or homely as a mud fence, healthy or sick on drugs, getting straight A's or flunking out, in jail or president of the local bank. How they look makes no difference, behavior makes no difference. A mother can love her child simply because he or she is her child. Unconditional love -- like God's love for us.

Recently we watched the Netflix movie "Come Sunday." It has a lot to say about God's unconditional love, God's love for all of us, God's love like a mother's love. In the movie, which is based on a true story, Carlton Pearson is the pastor of a megachurch in Tulsa who's doing really well, people are filling the pews and everyone loves him. He's a hero!

Then one evening at home he sees some television footage of starving children in Africa, and he begins to question how an all-loving God can allow such suffering in the world. Are those who haven't accepted Jesus and been baptized going to hell? How can anyone be in heaven knowing others are in hell?

So Pastor Pearson becomes convinced, as he puts it he is told by God, that there is no hell. God loves us all, in all conditions of life, even those who have never heard of Jesus Christ. All are God's children, the good ones and the bad ones, and God loves all people, unconditionally. And the pastor says so in a sermon. As a result he walks into a veritable buzz saw of opposition, gets a lot of pressure from the church higher-ups to recant, which he won't do, the congregation splits, and his life falls apart.

But – suppose Pastor Pearson is right – as I believe he is. Suppose God does love all humanity with an unconditional love – a love like a mother’s love, if you will. The Bible uses the image of God like a mother hen gathering her chicks, all her chicks, under her wings. Archbishop Tutu loves to quote that passage in John’s Gospel where Jesus (referring to his Ascension, which we celebrate today)—Jesus says, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” All people – not just the “good” people or the people who believe in God or the people who are baptized, or the people who go to church, but all people. “I will draw all people to myself.” (I wish I could impersonate the Archbishop like our rector can.) God loves us all, not because of what we do or what we believe but because of who we are, children of a loving God.

That’s the message that split Carlton Pearson’s church. But that’s the message Jesus is giving to us in his Ascension – that he is no longer confined to Jerusalem, to one place at a time, like us, but that he is risen to a new dimension, his risen and ascended body is everywhere present, broken out of its fleshly limitations and no longer confined to our three-dimensional world. In fact that was the name of Pastor Pearson’s church – “Higher Dimensions.” Jesus is risen to a new and higher dimension, transcending space and time, where he can be -- and is -- present everywhere at once. As St. Paul puts it, “Christ in you, (and you and you and you and you), the hope of glory.” The risen Christ is here in you and in me, in our families and friends, our co-workers and in everyone we meet, in the refugee from Guatemala or the immigrant from Africa. Jesus, the embodiment of God’s love, fills everything in God’s creation, whether we recognize him there or not. The love of God in Jesus Christ is a love like no other – even your mother’s!

That message of love and inclusiveness is so important in our world today. One of the other things Tutu likes to say, in his mischievous way with a twinkle in his eye, is that “God is not a Christian.” Imagine that! God is not a Christian. God is eternal and the Christian religion is a relative newcomer on the theological scene. Judaism and Buddhism and Hinduism are much older, as are any number of indigenous faiths around the globe. In Tutu’s words, “What faith you belong to is very largely an accident of birth and

geography. ... the revolutionary truth being that we are all loved equally by God.” We are all loved equally by God.

In our “global village” in which all faiths and races and creeds are neighbors, we have to learn to live together amicably if we don’t want to destroy the entire village. Climate change and nuclear war give us the capacity to destroy God’s creation. But we are all members of the human race, God’s children, in God’s image. Some religions have been around longer than others, just as some siblings are older than others. But the universal, unconditional love of God embraces all of us -- equally. All of us.

And I think this is where we can come back to the Ascension of Jesus as a guide for us today. Jesus “ascends” from our earthly three-dimensional way of thinking, where we see through a glass darkly, and promises to send the spirit of truth to unite us all. It’s like the rainbow – each color of the rainbow has its own truth, its own authenticity, yet it’s the combination of all the colors, side by side, that gives the rainbow its beauty.

We’re right now experiencing a fundamentalist religious and ethnic backlash that creates an ‘us’ and ‘them’ understanding. That’s so short-sighted and destructive. But the Ascension of Jesus tells us to lift up our eyes and look higher than that. In the rainbow nation we all live beside each other. It’s not the red or the yellow that makes the rainbow beautiful. It’s when you put all the colors together that it becomes beautiful. Beautiful because of its diversity. Beautiful perhaps like a mother’s love, the universal and perfect love of God.