

“OUR LOVING, NUTURING GOD”

John 17:6-19 May 13, 2018

Pastor Jeff Hayes of Faith Temple Church, Sioux Falls, South Dakota, offers these church signs for Mother’s Day:

THANKS, MOM,
FOR HAVING WOMB ENOUGH FOR ME!
YOU CAN’T SPELL MOTHERS
WITHOUT SPELLING OTHERS.
AND GOD RESTED ON THE SEVENTH DAY
AND MOM TOOK OVER.

Years ago, many of us made a phone call to mom as part of our weekly routines. Soon after moving into our first apartment or college dormitory, we dialed one of the few phone numbers we never had to look up. Today, for those blessed to still have their mothers in their lives, the tradition continues. We may choose to make a video call so mom can see her grandchildren, but the thought is the same.

In the days of John Wesley, founder of the Methodist movement, the technology available was vastly different. Because it was the 1700s, he wrote letters when he wanted to chat with his mother Susanna. While written correspondence has its limitations, one of the benefits is that some of the letters survived more than 275 years. Reading John and Susanna’s conversations gives us a glimpse into their lives.

John Wesley enjoyed a close relationship with his mom throughout his life. Susanna not only cared for her ten children’s physical needs, she also homeschooled them teaching each of them to read.

Susanna viewed motherhood as a role from God. This led her to take time for each child individually. “On Monday I talk with Molly,” Susanna wrote to her husband when he was away, “on Tuesday with Hetty; Wednesday with Nancy; Thursday with Jacky [that’s what the family called John]; Friday with Patty; Saturday with Charles [the hymn writer to be]; and with Emily and Suky together on Sunday” (Wesley 285).

During this one-on-one time, Susanna mentored each child in what it means to live as a follower of Jesus. John’s time with his mom seemed to stay with him throughout his life. For example, when John was just five years old, he was dramatically saved from the family’s home as it burned. From that time on, Susanna sometimes called her Jack, “a brand plucked from the burning,” a reference to Zechariah 3:2. Wesley came to understand that God had saved him for a purpose.

In adulthood, John wrote letters asking Susanna for advice. He consulted her in many areas of his life, including his ministry. While traveling on horseback around England and the surrounding areas, John Wesley regularly took time to keep in touch with his mother. He would find a quiet place in whatever town his travels had taken him, and write a letter to Susanna. While many of the letters contain important correspondence, sometimes he simply shared what was happening in his life.

In many of the letters, he asked her to pray for him. For example, toward the conclusion of the letter from Holland he wrote, “Dear mother, pray earnestly for me, that all things may work together for my good, and that by all God would build me in the faith which is in Christ Jesus!” Then, before his signature, he penned a version of his typical closing to his mom, “Your affectionate and dutiful son.” And even with his mother he would sign his full name, John Wesley.

Susanna Wesley was a remarkable mom who made a conscious decision to pass her faith on to her children in ways that influenced John throughout his life. Technologies change, but children still check in with their mothers who have shaped the faith of their children. It is one way we express gratitude for the gift of a loving parent.

In today's scripture John 17:11, Jesus prays to his Holy Father for protection for his followers. He says: "And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one." Jesus was asking that the disciples be united in harmony and love as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are united—the strongest of all unions. His great desire for his disciples was that they would become one. He wanted them united as a powerful witness to the reality of God's love.

"That they may be one." Jesus told his followers that they should be one in this world, in their culture and their time. It goes along with Jesus always reminding them that the Kingdom of Heaven is here—not something that will come in the next world. So, this is one of the most puzzling verses in the gospel, and Jesus says it several different ways. He says it always as a very positive statement, not as a question, "Wouldn't it be nice if they became one as you and I are one?" He says it as if he expects this to happen. He says it as if he thinks we understand what he's talking about.

It is pretty much a guarantee that Jesus knows what he is talking about. It's probably our misunderstanding of "unity" and "respect" that is at stake here. We may not even understand truly what it means to "be one as Jesus and the Father are one." It's hard enough to understand the complexity of human

nature, as evident in our lack of understanding of people and cultures who are different from us. How can we ever understand the theological implications of the unity within the Trinity? And we are supposed to be able to strive for that goal?

In a 1997 edition for the magazine Christian Century, the Rev. Dean Lueking wrote an article that put this intricate, difficult problem very well:

“Nevertheless, *that they may be one* still haunts as well as inspires. It is wearisome, deadly wearisome, to endure church battles that split not once but repeatedly. The blight of triumphalism, of power games, and the obsession with always being right still throw up huge, offensive roadblocks against Jesus’ prayer. Such sin drags us back to the Upper Room, to dull disciples among whom we now sit, to the grief of our Lord over our tearing apart the seamless robe of unifying love in which he would wrap us.”

Lueking is focusing on the tearing apart from our own church battles. Jesus included not only those, but also the tearing apart of cultures, peoples, nations, every bit of our human existence. Oneness with God means being at one with all of God’s gifts: cultures, peoples, nations, every bit of our human existence. To tear apart one bit of our gift is to put a tear in the beauty of oneness with God and oneness with each other.

If we begin just with our problems of division as churches, we see how quickly we destroy what we often hear called “unity within diversity.” In our churches today we speak often of the importance of working ecumenically—respecting differences in things such as theology, liturgy, and tradition. But in some denominations, ecumenism means that we all hope those who are “different” will “come home,” so to speak, to rejoin our way of doing things so we can all be the same.

Being *the same* is not the basis of unity. *Love* is the basis of unity.

When St. Paul said there was no more male or female, Jew or Greek,

slave or free, he certainly didn't mean that men and women morphed into some other form of human being or that Jews and Greeks would suddenly become one new nationality. He meant that each of us in our uniqueness would look with love on all the other precious creatures of God. He meant that we would see beauty in the gifts others have and join together to build the Kingdom of God.

Perhaps Jesus was praying that we would be able to worship God in many different ways, many different liturgies, and many different traditions-that our unity would be in fact that we share our love and praise of God with others and invite them to seek our God with us.

This kind of love is hard when we put barriers in place to make sure those who join our particular brand of religion, so to speak, all behave just as we do. These barriers can be like the unspoken rules about who is of the right social class to join us, or as obvious as ignoring those of a different race or culture.

To the division we find in church, we must add the divisions we find in many other places of our lives. Watch any news program today and we find ourselves immersed in the evils of war, poverty, fanaticism and greed. We're becoming used to seeing horrific killings brought right into our living rooms from across the world. How do we feel when we see this? Are we horrified enough to go right to prayer, not only for those being killed, but for those doing the killing? Or do we immediately lump those doing evil with every other member of their tradition? Do we pray that those doing evil will somehow be guided toward repentance? Do we pray enough for each other when much smaller aggravations happen in our church lives?

The love that exists among the Trinity is not a stagnant, complacent love. It's a love that not only draws the Trinity into one, but also burns outward

to include all creation. Jesus offers this love to be our reservoir of strength and truth, that sacred place where we gain the words and guidance we need as we build God's kingdom here on earth.

If we take Jesus' words seriously, we'll hear that the same vibrant, out pouring love that is God, is there for us. All need to do is believe it and then let it guide our words and actions.

In 1 Peter 1:22c it says "through the Spirit in sincere love of the brethren, love one another fervently with a pure heart."

Wow! What a statement!

There is no greater force on earth than love.

If two people truly love each other, they will do anything for the other. There is no greater bond on earth than true love. This is especially true of the love between believers in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let's now connect the subject of the love of God then to mothers. In Isaiah 66:13, God describes His love for us. To help us understand Him, He says look at the love a mother has for her children, for her family. "As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you, and you shall be comforted in Jerusalem." When we truly understand Biblical love it is a "comforting love." Without argument that is the kind of love, God has for his children.

As God says to love each other fervently, He is talking about what the Greek calls "Philadelphia love", a very special kind of love. A mother's love for her family is really "Philadelphia love" because that is how God loves you and I as believers.

The word **fervently** in 1 Peter 1:22 says that believers should love with full intensity. It literally means TO STRETCH LOVE FULLY OUT OR TO

LOVE ONE ANOTHER IN AN ALL OUT MANNER. Surely that is how God loves us and he says that a mother's love is much like His.

On the great biographer Ida M. Tbell's 80th birthday, someone asked her to name the greatest persons she had ever met. She responded, "The greatest persons I have ever met are those nobody knows anything about." She concludes, "I ask you, who was greater? Thomas A. Edison or his mother? When he was a young lad his teacher sent him home with a note which said, "Your child is dumb. We can't do anything for him." Mrs. Edison wrote back, "You do not understand my boy. I will teach him myself." And she did, with results that are well known.

Once the New York Times was asked to help a group of club women decide on the twelve greatest women in the United States. After due consideration, the editors replied, "The twelve greatest women in the United States are women who have never been heard of outside of their own homes."

In one of her columns Erma Bombeck tells of God in the act of creating mothers. She says that on the day God created mothers He had already worked long overtime. And an angel said to Him, "Lord, you sure are spending a lot of time on this one."

The Lord turned and said, "Have you the specs on this model? She is supposed to be completely washable, but not plastic. She is to have 180 moving parts, all of them replaceable. She is to have a kiss that will heal everything from a broken leg to a broken heart. She is to be able to function on black coffee & leftovers. And she is supposed to have six pairs of hands."

"Six pairs of hands," said the angel. "That's impossible." "It's not the six pairs of hands that bother me," said the Lord. "It's the three pairs of eyes."

“She is supposed to have one pair that sees through closed doors so that whenever she says, “What are you kids doing in there?-- she already knows what they’re doing in there.”

“She has another pair in the back of her head to see all the things she is not supposed to see but must see. And then she has one pair right in the front that can look at a child that just goofed and communicate love and understanding without saying a word.”

“That’s too much,” said the angel. “You can’t put that much in one model. Why don’t you rest for a while and resume your creating tomorrow?”

“No, I can’t,” said the Lord. “I’m close to creating someone very much like myself. I’ve already come up with a model who can heal herself when she is sick—who can feed a family of six with one pound of hamburger—one who can persuade a nine year old to take a shower.”

The angel reached over and touched her cheek. “This one has a leak,” he said. “I told you that you couldn’t put that much in one model.” “That’s not a leak,” said the Lord. “That’s a tear.”

“What’s a tear for?” asked the angel. “Well, it’s for joy, for sadness, for sorrow, for disappointment, for pride.” “You’re a genius,” said the angel.

Thankfully God has exposed us to us the wonder of our mothers and His love for us. Thanks be to God! Amen and amen.

