

Pastor Chris Matthis  
Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado  
Ascension Day, Series B  
Saturday, May 5th, 2018  
Sunday, May 6th, 2018 (Mother's Day)

Sermon: A Mother's Witness<sup>1</sup>  
Text: 2 Timothy 1:5

Focus: God gives us mothers to teach us the faith.

Function: That they would honor their mothers and serve them.

Structure: Text-Application

Locus: "We should fear and love God so that we do not despise our parents and other authorities, but honor them, serve and obey them, love and cherish them" (SC, Fourth Commandment).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. In the midst of the American Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln summoned a young soldier to the White House. Glad for the leave and expecting some kind of honor or encouraging word from the president, the young man happily presented himself in full uniform. He did not expect the rebuke Lincoln gave him.

"You have not written to your mother," said the president, "but *she* has written to *me*!" What proceeded was a scolding in which the president upbraided the private for ignoring his mother's letters to him. Apparently, she feared for his life and had written directly to the president to inquire about his welfare. The delinquent son had neglected his mother and taken her love for granted. President Lincoln handed that soldier pen and paper and didn't let him leave his office until he had written to his mother!<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Portions of this sermon are taken from the sermon I preached at my mom's memorial service on June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2017, at University Lutheran Church in Tallahassee, Florida.

<sup>2</sup> This story comes from [esermons.com](http://esermons.com).

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Sometimes it takes a president to set us straight in our relationship with Mom. In fact, it was another president, Woodrow Wilson, who signed a proclamation in 1914 designating the second Sunday in May as a national holiday to honor mothers.

Martin Luther did even better. In the Large Catechism, writing about the Fourth Commandment (“Honor your father and mother”), Luther states that our parents’ majesty is second only to that of God (LC I, 116). Because of the great love God shows our parents by establishing the Fourth Commandment, “if we had no father and mother, we should wish that God would set up wood and stone before us, so that we might *call* them father and mother. Since He has given us living parents, how much more should we rejoice to show them honor and obedience?” (LC I, 125). “To God, to parents, and to teachers we can never offer enough thanks and compensation” (LC I, 130). And with his usual wry sense of humor, Luther adds: “If, therefore, you will not obey father and mother and submit to their discipline, then obey the hangman” (LC I, 135)!

I must admit that I did not always honor my parents as I should have. Like any child, I was at times disrespectful and disobedient. As an adult, I was often impatient with my parents or didn’t properly value their advice. My great regret in life is that I didn’t call, write, or visit them enough because I was “too busy” with my own life, work, and kids. Now they’re gone, and I’ll never get back those missed moments. I’m glad I have God’s forgiveness (and theirs), but don’t be like me. Martin Luther said that anyone who does not care for their parents or grandparents in their old age cannot rightly be called a Christian (cp. 1 Tim. 5:4).

Who do so many preachers, presidents—indeed, God himself—so greatly emphasize the importance of loving and serving our mothers? I can assure you that it’s not based merely on sentiment because they gave you birth. Nor is it some kind of transaction or economic exchange:

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when you're young they care for you, so that when they are old, you feel obligated to take care of them. No, the reason why God wants us to honor our parents is because they reflect God's own majesty, authority, and creative power to us.

Yes, our mothers give us life. But *Christian* mothers give us something even greater: knowledge of the Lord, his Word, and his ways. In his second letter to Timothy, St. Paul reminds his protégé to remember his mother Eunice and grandmother Lois, whose faith dwelt also in him (2 Tim. 1:5). Why? Because a mother taught her daughter about Jesus, and she, in turn, shared her faith with her son, who grew up to become a pastor and missionary. The Scriptures are clear that faith formation begins at home, in the family, not at church or even Sunday school. As Yahweh commanded Israel: "And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently *to your children*, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise" (Deut. 6:6-7).

If it weren't for my mother, I wouldn't stand in front of you here today. Nobody was a bigger cheerleader for my ministry than my mom. Yet more importantly, my mother is the main reason why I am a Christian today. When I was born, my mother, a lapsed believer, searched for a Lutheran church to have me baptized. She invited my father to go to church with her, which he did, and as a result he became a Christian and, eventually, a Lutheran pastor.

Unfortunately, my parents divorced when I was only three years old. My mother raised me. She taught me how to pray and the importance of reading the Bible. I can still remember sitting with my sister on my mom's lap while she read Bible stories to us out of the Golden Book Children's Bible with its full-page watercolor illustrations and old timey, King James English.

Mom taught us how to pray—and she allowed no rote, memorized prayers at bedtime or the dinner table. So instead of learning Luther’s Table Prayer, I grew up telling God what I was thinking and feeling in my heart just like a conversation. I also grew up listening to praise and worship music in the car on road trips and running errands.

Every Christmas morning, Mom made sure that we read the Nativity story from Luke 2 before we opened our presents so that there would never be any doubt in our minds that Jesus was the greatest gift of all.

Last spring, after my mom’s bicycle accident, my sister Kirsten found these words written on the inside back cover of her Bible: “God loves me not because of who *I* am, but because of who *God* is!” My mom loved Jesus and believed the Gospel, the Good News that God loves us, not because of who we are, or what we’ve done or haven’t, but simply and solely because of who God is and because of what Jesus did for us on the cross. And that blessed reality informed and shaped everything about her and the way she loved me and my sisters.

For above all, she believed what the Bible teaches: that God is love and that he has revealed himself in Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, who bore our sins on the cross and rose again so we can live forever with him—not just in heaven “someday,” but here and now. My mom prayed and read her Bible daily, highlighting and underlining favorite passages and writing about them in her journal. (My sister has that Bible now and reads it every day.)

Mom lived and died with faith in Christ. And her faith lives on in me and my sons: the greatest inheritance I could ever receive. As Solomon writes in Proverbs: “Hear, my son, your father's instruction, and forsake not your mother's teaching, for they are a graceful garland for your head and pendants for your neck” (Prov. 1:8-9). My mom gave me life, and she gave me new life when she brought me to the life-giving waters of Holy Baptism. She pointed me the

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way to Jesus, which is all he wants of any of us. “You will receive power..., and you will be my witnesses...,” Jesus says in our reading for Ascension Day (Acts 1:8). A mother’s witness is a powerful thing. I praise God and give him thanks for the wonderful gift of a Christian mother. And I rejoice that *my* kids have a tremendous gift in their mother, my beautiful wife Lisa.

I recognize that Mother’s Day is not a happy occasion for all of us. Some of us miss our mothers terribly, even if they went to heaven many years ago. Some of you never knew your mother or your mother was distant because of divorce, addiction, or abuse. Still others of you cry silently today because you want for nothing more than to *become* a mother, but God has not yet blessed you with a baby.

Here is the Good News: the Lord sees your sadness and keeps count of your tears in a bottle (Ps. 56:8). And even if your mother has abandoned you, the Lord will take you in (Ps. 27:10). God’s love for you is greater than that of any earthly mother. Jesus longs to gather you as a mother hen gathers her chicks (Matt. 23:37). He comforts you like a mother with his word of mercy and forgiveness (Isa. 66:1). And, like a nursing mother, he will never forget you (Isa. 49:15). That is my mother’s witness. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of ✠ the Holy Spirit. Amen.