

SIN IS LOVE'S MOTHER

A MOTHER'S DAY SERMON

The Reverend Anne F. C. Richards

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John 17:20-26

When I was a kid, I had a friend whose little sister loved tongue sandwiches. No one could understand it, since kids usually don't like foods like tongue, but she was just crazy about it. Every chance she had, this little girl had a tongue sandwich.

One day, while munching on a tongue sandwich, the girl said to her mother, "Mom, what part of the cow does the tongue come from?" And her mom said, "Well, honey, the tongue comes from the tongue." You never saw anyone throw down a tongue sandwich so fast as when that little girl realized for the first time that tongue was tongue.

I've always thought of that funny story when I think about how life can be a series of moments in which we realize what things really are, and who people really are, and who God really is – instead of what we always thought they were. In a sense, this is what religion is all about: seeing things as they really are, and seeing God shining through it all, instead of living within the illusions and false realities that seem to come with being human. Because we're always trying to pretend that tongue is something other than tongue. And you can see the record of all that pretense in Scripture, beginning with Adam and Eve, who on about page two of the Bible decide that their human love for each other and for the world they have been given is really not enough and so they abandon the human endeavor and try to be like God. God had called it all "good," but they didn't want good. They wanted perfect.

In today's gospel from John's gospel, Jesus talks about what love really is. And so it's a great gospel for

Mother's Day, which is I guess intended to be all about love.

I think mothers are the unsung heroes of the world, but Mother's Day is can be a little tricky unless you are a perfect mother or have had a perfect mother, which I don't think includes anyone here. It can be one of the hardest days of the year for women, because we so idealize motherhood and mother love and we somehow expect Mother's Day to be a perfect expression of that idealized love that we are always disappointed. I can't tell you how many women have told me about crying secretly in the bathroom on the afternoon of Mother's Day because some kid has not called or they have been given a thoughtless gift or have been somehow felt unappreciated. I've been there myself. I've also heard loads of stories from adults who are permanently aggrieved at their parents' failings and at what their parents did not give them emotionally and so they wield that grief at the world (and sometimes at their parents) like a baseball bat.

Our culture has deified human love even though the constant witness of Scripture, including some of Jesus's most important words, warn us against the danger of doing this. I think we are in love with love, especially when it comes to how we think about parenting. More and more, I see young parents – but especially mothers – being so perfectionistic about providing everything for their children and making sure their children have every opportunity and never feel any kind of unhappiness or want that their kids

are smothered with nurturance. More and more I see moms who are afraid to give their kids the structure and space and limits every child needs because they are afraid of (as they say) “scarring them for life.” I wonder where that fear comes from. Because aside from willful abuse and neglect over time, it’s really hard to scar a kid for life. I wonder if the only thing that *could* scar a kid for life is our addiction to nurturance, because it keeps kids tied up in knots, afraid to breathe and unable to really feel anything because they have been anesthetized by our parenting.

This is part of what Jesus meant when he said we have to hate our mothers and our fathers and our sisters and brothers. He was using hyperbole, of course. But it was a warning that unless we set our kids free from our families and even in some sense from the bonds of our love, they will never become themselves and they will never be able really to love God.

Well, it’s good thing that no matter how hard we try, most of us don’t do such a perfect job of mothering and fathering. It’s a good thing when our kids remind us of that. And life will have its way with us. Life will undo what we have tried to bind and hold. And it will always show us that the kind of love that Jesus speaks of in today’s gospel – the love that is of God and that unites us in a way that gives life – is not our own creation.

That’s the background story of today’s gospel. Jesus speaks these words about the love that unites at the Last Supper, right after Judas has left the room to set the plot against Jesus in motion. Judas wasn’t a devil. In a way, he was a guy with a broken heart. He was the most zealous of Jesus’s disciples, believing so strongly in Jesus that he was always pushing him to be the conventional Messiah and to take a more revolutionary and militaristic stance against the Romans, but of course Jesus knew that was not his path. And so what Judas had in mind, when he arranged for Jesus to be handed over, was probably to get Jesus arrested and thrown into jail and maybe roughed up for a few days so that Jesus could see that he needed to take a more forceful path. It didn’t turn out the way he intended, though. They didn’t let Jesus go. And so Judas, in horror at the unintended consequences of what he has set in motion, kills himself. There is no other explanation for his suicide.

And so Judas’s love for Jesus was fierce but imperfect. But out of the great imperfection of

Judas’s human love came the even greater love of God in the resurrection. In this life, it doesn’t work any other way. Love is born of sin. Sin is love’s mother.

I think life teaches us this if we are attentive to it. I am going to tell you a story now that I told you about 6 years ago. It has been a foundational story in my own life and since I am leaving soon, this is the last time you will have to hear it. It’s a story about how sin is love’s mother.

In 1985 I was a student chaplain at NYU Medical Center in the city. Floor upon floor of the hospital was filled with young men dying of AIDS. One morning a unit nurse paged me and said there was a young guy named Michael who wanted to talk with a chaplain. When I got to the room, I found a young man bound to a whole lot of machines and monitors and tubes. He said to me, “It’s time for me to get my life together.”

Over the next six weeks, I got to know Michael pretty well. He was brought him as the youngest of five kids in a devout Methodist family in Florida. His parents’ names were Pete and Nelle. When Michael was about 18, he told his parents he was gay. His parents told him they did not want him to be gay, and so he asked the elders in his church to pray over him to change him, and when that didn’t work, he went to some fundamentalist healers but that didn’t work either. When he told his parents he had tried to change but couldn’t, they told him that he could no longer be a part of their family and that he had to leave the house. These people were not monsters. They were nice people. They were good people. They thought they were doing the right thing for their son and for their religion and for their community.

So Michael took a bus to New York City. He had never been outside of Florida. He had not gone to college. He went to a big strange city and he found himself a job. Eventually, he made friends. He did well. He had a good life. He also did some stupid stuff – no stupider than most of us have done – and he got sick. He was too afraid to go to a doctor and so he got sicker and sicker. When he finally came to the Emergency Department at NYU Medical Center he had AIDS-related lymphoma and some opportunistic infections. He was very ill.

This is what he said to me: “I have always believed in God, and I want to have a relationship with God

again, now.” He asked me if I were sure that God loved him. I was just a young person myself. But it didn’t take many brains to assure him that God did love him and that God had always loved him and been with him.

When it became clear that Michael had only a few days to live, he said, “I think I should call my Mom.” Remember that he had had no contact with his parents for eight years. I said, “Yes, let’s call your Mom.” Well, Nelle got on the very next plane and she came up to New York and she cared for her son like an angel. And then two days later, his father Pete and his four siblings all flew up together. Pete had a phobia about flying so they had to tank him up with valium to get him on the plane.

It was late at night when they got to the hospital. I will never forget how they came into the room, in complete silence. It was a private room, pretty spacious, and because people were so scared of AIDS in those days, they all filed in and stood around the perimeter of the room, with their backs to the wall. They didn’t say a word.

I was standing by the bed, holding Michael’s hand. He looked at his Dad and he held my hand out to him and he said, “Dad, I would like you to meet Anne. Anne, I would like you to meet my Dad. He has been the best Dad any boy could ever have.” And Pete came to the bed and took his son in his arms and wept. He said, “Mikey, you are a good boy and you have always been a good boy.” Then Michael’s three sisters and brother came to the bed and touched him and cried with him.

After a few minutes, Mike said, “Now, I would like you all to leave the room and then come in, one at a time. I want to speak with each of you alone, one at a time. Anne, you stay here and hold my hand.” And so each one of them came into the room, one by one, and Michael had one last talk with his family. Each of his sisters and his brother told him that they would never forget him.

At the very end, Michael said, “Now I would like everyone to come back in here. We’re going to say the Lord’s Prayer together.” And so we did. When we finished the prayer, Mike closed his eyes, and a few minutes later, he died. He was twenty-six years old.

I want to make it clear that by any standard at all, Nelle was a failure as a mother and Pete was a failure

as a father, because they did not do what good parents do. They did not accept and value and love their son as the person he was. That sin broke their family apart.

But because of the resurrection, sin is love’s mother. Sin gave birth to love in Mike’s family. And it happened because Mike understood that we cannot always expect the people we love to love us in the way we want and need to be loved. Human beings are too imperfect for that. This is the mark of a mature person: *To understand that you cannot always expect the people you love to love you in the way you want and need to be loved.* We are almost always failing each other, even when we think we’re not. We are that feeble; we are that blind. But if we can bear that reality, then the space in us that is not filled by the love we aren’t getting can be filled with something else: a kind of spacious love that helps us understand what life is really about and launches us from the slavery of our needs into the freedom of the love of God. And it’s only God’s love – not ours – that makes it possible for us to forgive each other and be one with each other. This is the love that Jesus speaks of in today’s gospel, the love that enabled Jesus to call us his friends, even though we failed him.

You know, as I was thinking about Mike and his family this week, a few things came back to me. One was something that Mike said to me in his final weeks, when the doctors were still trying to save his life. He said, “Whatever happens, I hope we will always be friends.” Well, Mike has come back to me again and again over the years – almost 30 years now. He has returned. I can still feel him holding my hand and saying, “My Dad was the best Dad any boy could ever have.” He wasn’t fibbing. He wasn’t trying to be nice. He was talking about the love of God that had always been there.

And so nothing is ever broken that God does not intend to heal. That is the gift God is always trying to give us. If we can’t accept it in this life, then it is the gift God gives us in our death, when whoever we are and whatever we have done or left undone, we are made whole, forgiven, and returned to each other. We will see everything clearly, as it really is, shining with love. And finally, we will become one with each other and with the God who is our Mother and our Father.

Amen.

