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## **Meditation: Your Mother**

Matthew 12:46-50

May 11, 2003

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This may be a rather strange time to do this, but I need to come clean with you. There has been an area of my life . . . a time that I haven't shared with many. It was a time of profound confusion. For months my mind was a blur, and I had no control over my faculties. I couldn't even get out of bed. I'd lie there weeping in my own filth. I spoke in monosyllables, my words unintelligible. It seemed like all I wanted to do was drink . . . and belch.

When I was at my worst, I was utterly naked, covered in blood and slime, screaming in terror as an unknown man slapped my naked buttocks. It was August 5, 1961, the day I was born.

And I'm telling you! — if it wasn't for the love of my mom, I wouldn't have made it to my first birthday. But she loved me just as I was, covered in blood and slime, screaming. She picked me up, held me to herself, and gave me her very life. She set me free, and she's bearing fruit in me *still*, forty-one years later!

Scientists have done weird experiments with rhesus monkeys and surrogate mothers made of wire, and they tell us we all need a mother. In fact, it's very clear that God made each of us in such a way that we desperately need a mother.

Who's your mother?

Matthew 12:46:

*While Jesus was still speaking to the people, behold, his mother and his brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him. But he replied to the man who told him, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother."*

Jesus says, "Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my mother and sister and brother." The will of His Father is that all who "see and believe" in the Son should be saved. If you "see and believe" in Jesus, you are Christ's mother . . . and you are also Christ's brothers and sisters. Brothers and sisters have the same mother. So . . .

Who's your mother? —  
The same as Jesus' mother.

In Revelation 12 we meet the mother of Jesus: “a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.” She’s more than just Mary (married to Joseph); she’s the mother of Jesus and also the mother of us. She’s the Church—God’s people, who “bear testimony to Jesus.” Through her, Christ is born and formed in you: that is, through her you’re born again. We’re born again as babies.

Remember, babies don’t grow up overnight. They turn into toddlers who play in the toilet, then school kids who talk back and say bad words when relatives visit, then teenagers, and then it *really* gets messy! All along, they need a mother.

Well, the Evil One lies to you, saying that you don’t have a mother, or that you don’t need a mother, or that your mother would never accept you naked and covered in blood, unable to clean up your own filth. But that’s what mothers do.

The Church is your mother.

Your mother is a universal and tremendous mystery. Yet in times and places, she wraps herself in a name . . . like First Baptist or Evergreen Fellowship or Rockland Community Church or Lookout Mountain Community Church. If you worship here, this church is your mother somehow, and this is her twentieth anniversary. And if you worship Jesus here “in spirit and in truth,” you are *my* mother. *Happy Mother’s Day!*

I’d just like to tell you some of the things I like about my mother:

1. She loves all her children unconditionally, and she doesn’t have to try; it’s her nature.

Moms just love babies: helpless, crying, incoherent, and covered in blood and slime. When our first child was born, my wife experienced twenty-four hours of labor. She kept passing out on the delivery table. When he was born, my son had a cone head and a black eye, and blood was everywhere. I just didn’t know *what* to think or feel. Susan took one look at Jonathan and exclaimed, “Oh, I want another one!” That’s a mom.

Well, we’d like to think that when we were born again, we were *not* naked, incoherent, or wailing in our own blood. We’d like to think we were born again because we had our act together and impressed God as wonderful candidates for eternal life.

In Ezekiel 16 God speaks to Jerusalem saying, “On the day you were born your cord was not cut, nor were you washed with water to make you clean, nor were you rubbed with salt or wrapped in cloths. . . . I passed by and saw you kicking about in your blood, and as you lay there in your blood I said to you, ‘Live!’”

My point is, you were born again as a baby, born of a mother. And God nourishes you through a mother. And the good mother loves because it’s her nature. She loves all her children with all her self.

A few minutes after Jimmy Carter was inaugurated as President, a reporter got hold of his mother. His first question was, “Lillian, aren’t you proud of your son?” She replied, “Which one?”

Good moms are proud of their sons just because they exist, whether their claim to fame is Billy Beer (Billy Carter) or President of the United States (Jimmy Carter).

My good mother loves all her children in all their diversity.

- Some grew up in Sunday School; some grew up in covens; some grew up in both.
- Some are Roman Catholic by tradition; some are Baptist; some are both.
- Some are scientists; some are poets; some are both.
- Some are Bible scholars; some are charismatic; many are both, I hope.

But she loves *all* her children

with all their various talents

and gifts and handicaps

and doubts and fears and sins.

Her children are any that are conceived of her groom, any that bear the life of their Father, and she gives that life—her life—to her children. And that's number two . . .

2. She gives her life to her children.

My earthly mother Evelyn literally gave her life to me, and I've just always believed she'd give her life *for* me. On weekends I'd come home from college in Boulder, and without receiving any advanced notice, my mom would stay up all night long typing term papers for me. And I thought that was normal.

But it wasn't just deeds or words or formulas, it was unconscious gestures and expressions . . . a spirit that said, "I will love you forever and always adore you." That spirit of love is life, not a formula or technique or program.

I read about a mother who had just read a book on parenting. She felt convicted, so she went upstairs to her son's room, knocked on the door, and said, "Do you have a minute?"

"Yes," he said and let her in.

She said, "Son . . . I just . . . I love the way you play the drums."

He said, "Really? Thanks."

She got up and left, and then came back. "Do you have a minute?"

"Yes."

She said, "Son, when I was here a moment ago, I didn't really say what I came to say. Your dad and I . . . we just think you're great."

He said, "OK, mom, thanks a lot."

She left, and once again, halfway down the stairs, she turned around, came back, and knocked. He yelled, "Yes, I have a minute."

She sat down and said, "You know, son, I've tried twice now and haven't got it out. What I really came here to tell you is this: I love you. I love you with all my heart. Not Dad and I love you, but *I* love you."

He said, "I love you too," and gave her a hug. She started out of the room and he said, "Mom, do you have a minute?"

“Sure,” she said.

“Mom, did you just come back from a seminar?”

I don’t think Lookout Mountain Community Church feels like she just got back from a seminar, like we’re one more seeker-sensitive church, one more purpose-driven church, one more Presbyterian church, one more church that learned to be a church out of a book somewhere. The love and the life are deeper than that, more personal than that, and her love and life tell us who we are and who our Father is.

Arguably, the greatest theologian of the twentieth century was Karl Barth. Toward the end of his career a reporter asked him, “Sir, you’ve written these great volumes about God, great learned tomes about all the difficult problems of God. How do you know they’re all true?” Barth smiled and said, “Because my mother said so.”

That’s a profound answer . . . for ultimately truth is not contained in books, but it is encountered in persons. For truth *is* a person. Barth met truth, life, and love in his mother. (He could have been talking about his *mom* or his *church* or *both*. I can talk about both.) I’ve met Jesus in you—my mother, and through you He tells me who I am.

3. A good mother tells us who we are.

4. She’ll be honest . . . honest because she’s married to the Truth and she knows the Truth loves her children and sets them free.

Love *is* truth. She’ll speak truth even if it hurts like hell . . . truth about the children and truth about herself.

Years ago the Session went on a retreat and asked, “Who is Lookout Mountain Community Church?” and “What does God want us to be?” We came up with words like *authentic* and *honest* and *vulnerable* and *incarnate* and *real*. We coined a phrase, “Real Church in an Unreal World.”

I love this about my church—my mother:

- She wants me to be real, more than put on a show.
- She wants me to be real, even if it embarrasses her in front of the other mothers around town, who think the things I say can be a bit much, even when they’re things my Father said.

You know, mothers like to get together and compare their children and compete. Often when a mother is insecure about her groom’s love, she’ll do that. And then instead of *serving* her children she’ll *use* her children to feel good about herself.

- She’ll act like she’s serving the children, but she’s dependent on the children serving her.
- She’s codependent, so she wants them to *stay* children: dependent, obedient, uniform children.
- She demands uniformity and conformity in the place of love.

So her children serve her in shame according to law. They serve her, yet they hate her — like Pharisees.

5. I love that Lookout Mountain Community Church—my mother—grants freedom, and she's not codependent.

Anthony DeMello writes:

When a child is sure of his mother's love, he forgets his mother; he goes out to explore the world; he is curious. He looks for a frog to put in his mouth — that kind of thing. When a child is hovering around his mother, it's a bad sign; he's insecure. Maybe his mother has been trying to suck love out of him, not giving him all the freedom and assurance he wants. His mother has always been threatening in many subtle ways to abandon him.

Well, I get a paycheck from my mother, for certain services rendered. And I realize that may and should stop at some point. But my mother will not abandon me. So DeMello writes, "The healthy child is interested in things. He's not clinging to his mother, because he's loved by his mother."

I love that at this church the children are curious, and they have freedom to stick frogs in their mouths. In some churches, you have to be in *their programs* doing *their missions* under *their direction* according to *their organizational scheme*. I love that fruit just *happens*, and we didn't map it out, plan it, or control it.

We have people who just started providing fresh water for the Dominican Republic . . .

- people who are bringing electricity to Africa
- people who are channeling money to the needy around the world
- people who are preaching the Gospel where it's never been heard
- people who are ministering to the homeless and leading church for folks in retirement homes
- people speaking around the world and writing books
- people ministering to folks with AIDS, sexual addictions, demonic oppressions, and unwanted pregnancies

We have young people leading youth groups in the Caribbean and in Ireland, and moms and dads adopting kids from the other side of the world. We never sat down and mapped any of that out! And that's only a sample of those things we can now quantify.

Far more important is the way you hug your wife tonight, or respect your husband, or listen to your neighbor, or speak truth to your employer, or kiss your kids goodnight. Truth and love are *caught* more than *taught*, for they are a life, a presence, a spirit.

Experts say that half of what we know we learned in our first year of existence. Before we can comprehend language, it's a touch, a glance, a hug, our mother's skin . . . it's the touch of grace and love in freedom.

6. The good mother bears the fruit of love in freedom rather than the fruit of law in shame.

That means a good mother is willing to endure some pain. That means she's willing to get crucified. At some point children rebel, and the good mother has to endure the pain and trust the Spirit of their Father (the Spirit of truth, life, and love) that she has loved into them, to bring them back home.

7. The good mother—my mother—Lookout Mountain Community Church—knows that the source of her truth, life, and love is communion with her Groom.

She knows that fruit happens when she is open and surrendered to the Father's Word: the Bridegroom—the Seed—Jesus.

Who's my mother? —  
 "Whoever does the will of my Father," said Jesus.

The Father wills that we believe the One He sent and receive His Spirit into naked, broken flesh like fertile soil, so we would bear fruit—fruit of His Spirit.

Well, that's what I like about my mother, Lookout Mountain Community Church.

Unconditionally loving,  
     Life-giving,  
         Identity-shaping,  
             Truth-telling,  
                 Freedom-granting,  
                     Spirit-dependent,  
                         Fruit-bearing.

And some of you are saying, "You're nuts! Delusional! I know it's Mother's Day and the Hallmark corporation is breathing down your neck, but be honest! I've been burned by the Church, disregarded by the Mother, spurned by the Mother. What you're saying, Peter, is not true."

Well, that's true . . . and not true. Remember Jesus told a parable about wheat and tares. What you call Lookout Mountain Community Church is both wheat and tares. The *true* Lookout Mountain Community Church is all wheat. It is that part of the visible Church that is surrendered to the Spirit of her Lord and Groom.

The *true* Church is Christ in us;  
 The *true* Church is His Spirit in us;  
 The *true* Church is the glory of God in a manger.

I've told you some of the pain I've experienced in churches. And I told you of my experience years ago wherein God told me in words, "Peter, you don't love my Bride very much, do you?" Well, not loving His Bride is also not loving my Mother.

Well, that very night He literally pinned me to the floor and revealed to me that all along He'd been loving me through my Mother the Church. At my home church I knew there was at least one abuser who hurt my family deeply. At my church there were wolves in sheep's clothing and tares that looked like wheat. They were at my home church, but *He* was *also* at my church. He was *in* those people who surrendered to Him: Mrs. Delzell and the flannel graph in Sunday School class; Gary Reddish, my youth pastor; my mom and my dad. They were my Mother.

Paul writes, "The Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother." John reveals, "The New Jerusalem is coming down." The New Jerusalem is hidden in this old Jerusalem, like treasure in a field, like a pearl buried in the mud. So the Church may act like the great whore, but she hides the Bride: your Mother. And you're commanded by your Father to love her and forgive her. In fact, you *are* her.

And now I want to read my favorite schmaltzy Mother's Day book, Love You Forever:

A mother held her new baby and very slowly rocked him back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. And while she held him, she sang:

I'll love you forever,  
I'll like you for always,  
As long as I'm living  
my baby you'll be.

The baby grew. He grew and he grew and he grew. He grew until he was two years old, and he ran all around the house. He pulled all the books off the shelves. He pulled all the food out of the refrigerator and he took his mother's watch and flushed it down the toilet. Sometimes his mother would say, "*This kid is driving me CRAZY!*"

But at night time, when that two-year-old was quiet, she opened the door to his room, crawled across the floor, looked up over the side of his bed; and if he was really asleep she picked him up and rocked him back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. While she rocked him she sang:

I'll love you forever,  
I'll like you for always,  
As long as I'm living  
my baby you'll be.

The little boy grew. He grew and he grew and he grew. He grew until he was nine years old. And he never wanted to come in for dinner, he never wanted to take a bath, and when grandma visited he always said bad words. Sometimes his mother wanted to sell him to the zoo!

But at night, when he was asleep, the mother quietly opened the door to his room, crawled across the floor and looked up over the side of the bed. If he was really asleep, she picked him up that nine-year-old boy and rocked him back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. And while she rocked him she sang:

I'll love you forever,  
I'll like you for always,  
As long as I'm living  
my baby you'll be.

The boy grew. He grew and he grew and he grew. He grew until he was a teenager. He had strange friends and he wore strange clothes and he listened to strange music. Sometimes the mother felt like she was in a *zoo*!

But at night time, when that teenager was asleep, the mother opened the door to his room, crawled across the floor and looked up over the side of the bed. If he was really asleep she picked him up that great big boy and rocked him back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. While she rocked him she sang:

I'll love you forever,  
I'll like you for always,  
As long as I'm living  
my baby you'll be.

That teenager grew. He grew and he grew and he grew. He grew until he was a grown-up man. He left home and got a house across town.

But sometimes on dark nights the mother got into her car and drove across town.

If all the lights in her son's house were out, she opened his bedroom window, crawled across the floor, and looked up over the side of his bed. If that great big man was really asleep she picked him up and rocked him back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. And while she rocked him she sang:

I'll love you forever,  
I'll like you for always,  
As long as I'm living  
my baby you'll be.

Well, that mother, she got older. She got older and older and older. One day she called up her son and said, "You'd better come see me because I'm very old and sick." So her son came to see her. When he came in the door she tried to sing the song. She sang:

I'll love you forever,  
I'll like you for always...



But she couldn't finish because she was too old and sick.

The son went to his mother. He picked her up and rocked her back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. And he sang this song:

I'll love you forever,  
I'll like you for always,  
As long as I'm living  
my Mommy you'll be.

When the son came home that night, he stood for a long time at the top of the stairs.

Then he went into the room where his very new baby daughter was sleeping. He picked her up in his arms and very slowly rocked her back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. And while he rocked her he sang:

I'll love you forever,  
I'll like you for always,  
As long as I'm living  
my baby you'll be.

That's the story of the Church and how she grows. "Love you forever" is your Father. "Love you forever" is your Groom. God *is* love—covenant love—"hesed" love—forever love.

Some of you have been loved by your mother a long time, but you don't love her well in return. Repent! Love your mother: love your church. She may be this particular church; she may be another church; she may be the person sitting next to you. The mother in the story mothered her child, and then her child mothered her and mothered others. He became mother.

Some of you hate Mother's Day because you had an evil mother or you don't know who your mother is. Listen. The "Jerusalem above" *is* your mother; the true Church *is* your mother.

Some of you hate Mother's Day because you think you are a poor mother. You've never had a child and you desperately wanted one. Maybe you abandoned a child or aborted a child or killed a child. At this table the Great Bridegroom washes you clean and makes you His Bride and impregnates you with His life.

Everyone who comes to this table in faith *is* truly a mother . . . *the* mother . . . Eve . . . Eve bearing our Lord's life into this dead world.

I Corinthians 15:45: "Thus it is written, 'The first man Adam became a living being'; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit."

If Jesus is the last Adam, that is, the "eschatos," eschatological Adam, the uttermost Adam (and He is), then you, my friends, are the uttermost Eve, New Jerusalem, Bride of Christ, Mother of Life.

Isaiah 54:

“Sing, O barren one, who did not bear; break forth into singing and cry aloud, you who have not been in travail! For the children of the desolate one will be more than the children of her that is married, says the LORD. Enlarge the place of your tent, and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out; hold not back, lengthen your cords and strengthen your stakes. For you will spread abroad to the right and to the left, and your descendants will possess the nations . . . . For your Maker is your husband . . . .”

So on the night that our Maker was betrayed, He took bread, and having given thanks He broke it saying, “This is my body which is broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”

In the same way, after supper He took the cup and said, “This is the cup of the New Covenant in my blood, shed for the forgiveness of sins. Drink of it, all of you, in remembrance of me.”

He had already told them, “Unless you eat my body and drink my blood, you have no life in you.”

So, Bride of Christ, we invite you to come to the table and receive His life. If you think you’re not worthy, that’s what makes you worthy. And if you think you *are* worthy and you deserve this somehow, you don’t get it. You’ve been born again, and He wants to breathe His life into you: a Word—Jesus. *Live*. Happy Mother’s Day.

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Some hate Mother’s Day,  
because they feel like a homeless child.  
Some hate Mother’s Day  
because they have a childless home.

Years ago, according to Alexander Woolcott, a grief-stricken mother sat in the hospital lounge in stunned silence, tears streaming down her cheeks. She had just lost her only child. She gazed blindly into space while the head nurse talked to her, simply because it was the duty of the head nurse to talk in such circumstances.

“Mrs. Norris, did you notice the shabby little boy sitting in the hall just next to your daughter’s room?”

“No,” Mrs. Norris mumbled.

“There,” she said, “there is a case. That little boy’s mother is a young French woman who was brought in a week ago by ambulance from their shabby one-room apartment to which they had gravitated when they came to this country scarcely three months ago. They had lost all their people in the old country and knew nobody here. The two had only each other. Every day that

lad has come and sat there from sunup to sundown in the vain hope that she would awaken and speak to him. Now, he has no home at all!"

Mrs. Norris was listening now. So the nurse went on.

"Fifteen minutes ago that little mother died, dropped off like a pebble in the boundless ocean, and now it is my duty to go out and tell that little fellow that, at the age of seven, he is all alone in the world." The head nurse paused, then turned plaintively to Mrs. Norris. "I don't suppose," she said hesitantly, "I don't suppose that you would go out and tell him for me?"

Then something beautiful happened. Mrs. Norris stood up, dried her tears, went out and put her arms around the lad, and led that homeless child off to her childless home.

That's a picture of the Church in this fallen world.

In the name of Jesus, love your mother and be a good mother! You're not alone. In Jesus' name, amen.

### Further Reading

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. "Honor your father and mother" (this is the first commandment with a promise) . . .

Ephesians 6:1-2

And a great portent appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars; she was with child and she cried out in her pangs of birth, in anguish for delivery. And another portent appeared in heaven; behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems upon his heads. His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven, and cast them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to bear a child, that he might devour her child when she brought it forth; she brought forth a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne, and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which to be nourished for one thousand two hundred and sixty days. . . . And when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued the woman who had borne the male child. But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle that she might fly from the serpent into the wilderness, to the place where she is to be nourished for a time, and times, and half a time. The serpent poured water like a river out of his mouth after the woman, to sweep her away with the flood. But the earth came to the help of the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed the river which the dragon had poured from his mouth. Then the dragon was angry with the woman, and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus.

Revelation 12:1-6, 13-17

"Sing, O barren one, who did not bear;  
break forth into singing and cry aloud,  
you who have not been in travail!  
For the children of the desolate one will be more  
than the children of her that is married, says the LORD.  
Enlarge the place of your tent,  
and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out;  
hold not back, lengthen your cords  
and strengthen your stakes.  
For you will spread abroad to the right and to the left,  
and your descendants will possess the nations  
and will people the desolate cities.  
Fear not, for you will not be ashamed;  
be not confounded, for you will not be put to shame;  
for you will forget the shame of your youth,  
and the reproach of your widowhood you will remember no more.  
For your Maker is your husband,  
the LORD of hosts is his name;  
and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer,  
the God of the whole earth he is called.  
For the LORD has called you  
like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit,

like a wife of youth when she is cast off,  
 says your God.  
 For a brief moment I forsook you,  
 but with great compassion I will gather you.  
 In overflowing wrath for a moment  
 I hid my face from you,  
 but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you,  
 says the LORD, your Redeemer.

Isaiah 54:1-8

But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother. For it is written, "Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear; break forth and shout, you who are not in travail; for the children of the desolate one are many more than the children of her that is married."

Galatians 4:26-27

. . . when the angel appeared before our Lady: nothing she had so far done or said would ever have made her the Mother of God, but the moment she gave up her will, she became the true mother of the eternal God's Word: suddenly she conceived God.

Meister Eckhart

And you, Jesus, are you not also a mother?  
 Are you not the mother who, like a hen,  
 gathers her chickens under her wings?  
 Truly, Lord, you are a mother,  
 for both they who are in labour  
 and they who are brought forth are accepted by you.  
 You have died more than they, that they may labour to bear.  
 It is by your death that they have been born,  
 for if you had not been in labour,  
 you could not have borne death;  
 and if you had not died, you would not have brought forth.

Saint Anselm

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