

John 15:1
5/10/2009

I will admit it. I am always a bit ambivalent about addressing Mother's day from the pulpit. For those of us who have lost our Mothers, Mother's Day is often bitter-sweet. And for those who do *not* have children but want them, Mother's Day can be what Valentine's Day is to us singles, an excuse to consume vast quantities of chocolate. And that's not even getting into the guilt-inducing Hallmark-ridden, floral-industrial-complex or the Freudian complexities of our relationships with our mommies. And yet, today, I do want to talk about being a Mother or at least being a parent, or even a role model. Specifically, I want to focus on one of the most difficult challenges parents and role models face... Namely, I want to talk about how to provide emotional security and protection for children and ourselves in a hostile, painful, and sometimes violent world.

When I was young, my parents strove for just such protection. Everything that they did was to shield me from perceived difficulties and trials in our world. And they had reason to do so, facing many trials themselves. Theirs was the first generation off the farm, and the first in generations to have college educations. My Father and Mother, therefore, wanted to provide me with all of the culturing and curing necessary for an upwardly mobile, straight, white upper middle class boy. "The world is your oyster" they seemed to say, but only if you know how to do business deals over golf, eat a company lunch, play racquetball with fellow CEO's, and, in Oklahoma, excel at football in high school. You can see how well their proto-MBA regimen worked. I was not exactly the ideal candidate for such a plan, which is why I'm with you good folks this morning. .

But I say all of that so that you can imagine how difficult it was for my parents years later when I told them that I am gay. At the age of 19, though, on Christmas break from Texas Tech University, that is exactly what I did. The truth had been percolating inside of me for several months. I had planned to tell them when I first arrived at home in mid-December, but Christmas came and went, and I could tell no one. The truth may have been percolating, but the courage to tell anyone was not. But then, on New Year's Eve, I joined my parents in our living room. We each had parties to go to and were dressed in holiday fashions. My Father brought out a silver tray with champagne and champagne flutes. We toasted the new year a little early before we went our separate ways. And my parents began to ask me about my life and semester. It was in that moment that I realized that I could not protect them as they were trying to protect me. I could not go through another year not being myself, no matter who that was, no matter what that meant. And I blurted out, "I *think* I like boys." It was just that hesitant and odd, as though it were an abstract possibility, an intellectual potential, and as though the opposite could equally have been true. But it was not, and I knew that I had changed everything. I could see them thinking, "we cannot protect him from this." And it was true, the world is often not safe for those who do not fit into "traditional" categories.

My parents did say that they loved me. But they voiced concerned. They still reached for protection. They hoped that I would not be exposed to ridicule and pain, though they acknowledged that was not likely. They knew that this meant that my life might be more

difficult, that it would not be a “straight” line. And no amount of golf lessons could prepare me for how to integrate all that I am. It was probably my first truly adult moment. My artist Mother, who adored her gay students, still grasped for denial for her own son. Just after the conversation, as we were about to part ways, she pulled back and said, “You know... as an artist I love the human form. In fact, I love painting nude women, the curves, their beauty.” She continued, “Perhaps, just perhaps, you do not want to BE with a man, as much as you just need to paint one.” I had to laugh. It was an absurd moment. I stared at her before we both burst into laughter. Leave it to an artist to believe that most of the world’s problems can be solved by painting. From that time, though it was not always easy, my parents, grew in acceptance, and accepted me as an adult. They also realized that protection from pain could not be the only goal of parenting. Their support and presence in the midst of pain was sometimes more important.

In today’s reading from Acts, we hear of a very powerful gentile man on the road between Jerusalem and Gaza, a dangerous place then as now. This man is the treasurer for the Queen of Ethiopia, Candace. In a sense, he is Queen Candace’s Secretary Geithner. And this man must have been revered. He had great power and authority. He was competent and protected. And he rode in a fine chariot. And yet, this unnamed is also emotionally torn by the pain in his life. In addition to all that he had accomplished, he had been “cut off” in almost every way. He was a eunuch. As a eunuch, he would have been trusted by his queen not to steal, because he would have no family to protect. And yet, he would have been excluded from the Temple in Jerusalem, and he would have been excluded from the love of God. And he would have no family to support him. This man, though he has luxury and wealth, is an outcast just as much as he is exalted. When we see him, he ponders the text from Isaiah:

"Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,
so he does not open his mouth.
In his humiliation justice was denied him.
Who can describe his generation?
For his life is taken away from the earth."

And this Eunuch cannot comprehend. In his world, the powerful and the mighty are not supposed to be humiliated. In his world, those who have found favor with God are queens and kings with great riches, the divine right of kings. Those who have favor with God are not humiliated eunuchs far from home on the side of the road, not crucified criminals who cry out with forgiveness, not slaughtered lambs. This Eunuch, much like my parents, believed only in godly parenting through ultimate physical protection. The treasurer part of himself, he could share and shout to the world. But everything else was supposed to be hidden in the closet and shrouded in shame.

A disciple of Jesus approaches the eunuch. Phillip tells the man the only answer to any of our world’s problems in relationship to God: He tells the eunuch that he is not alone, that God is there, and that the good news of God is not that following God is free from pain but rather that God’s love is never destroyed or far from us. And Phillip tells this man the good news that God’s love extends to the Eunuchs, and gentiles, and to all in this world. He does not have to hid

who he is. Phillip offers this eunuch a new sort of parent: honesty, vulnerability, and love, instead of over-zealous protection and fear.

My parents, understandably, wanted to protect me from every big bad wolf in the world. They wanted me to have health and wealth and peace. They, like the eunuch, like many of us, would stumble over this passage from Isaiah. And it is true that some of us are graced with the gifts of health, wealth, and peace, but we should not confuse that with God's favor, even if it is a blessing. Our God is a different sort of God than any other god perceived by or conceived by humanity. Our God allows us to be in difficult places, and instead of automatically saving us from those places, instead of only gracing us with only health and wealth and peace, our God inspires us to not be afraid, to realize that we are not alone, and to trust in God's love. In short, God prepares us for spiritual adulthood and to stand equally with God and with our fellow human beings.

To some, that does not feel like protection or God, better to have forts and guns and treasure. But in reality, God's protection is stronger. I am safer now, because I have confronted my truth. That eunuch was safer because he allowed the light of God to shine on what he hid in shame. He found a new family. I have found new families. And if you can gain anything from we supposed sexual deviants, me and this eunuch, let it be this: we are symbols that God is constantly reaching beyond our previously carefully defined ways. God is not only found in the treasury or in fitting into some idea of the norm, God is found in being truthful with ourselves, in laughter after tears, in Mothers and Fathers who care, even when it can be misdirected, in our vulnerabilities, in our weaknesses, on a cross, and in our lives. And in the end, this is better protection than the thickest steel walls, because no matter what happens, we understand that God's love is here, and that it prevails, and that the light will shine, if only we let it. And letting it shine is our ultimate goal and our true protection. And it is evidence of our God's mothering of us all.