

LOOKING CLOSELY

A Sermon by The Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on Mother's Day, May 14, 2017

Lectionary Readings: Proverbs 22:6, 1 Peter 3:4, Exodus 20:12, and Isaiah 66:12-13.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Mother's Day Poems Can Drive a Person Nuts

I've been gone a few Sundays for various reasons, and it's good to be back. Happy Mother's Day to you all. As I begin the sermon, let me start off by reading a brief poem:

M is for the million things she gave me.

O means only that she's growing old.

T is for the tears she shed to save me.

H is for her heart of purest gold.

E is for her eyes with love-light shining.

R is right, and right she'll always be.

Put them all together, and they spell Mother.

A word that means the world to me.

These kinds of poems drive me nuts, and this was the worst one I was able to find. They sentimentalize something important. In addition — I hate to say it — they open wounds for some people. There are women who either can't be or aren't mothers, yet often they do a lot of parenting. There are some families who are estranged, and an emotionalized Mother's Day just makes it more difficult.

Then there are those who have lost children, either because they have died or because, although still alive, they are out of communications and relationships with the family. A sentimentalized Mother's Day is just plain

depressing to such people. And there are single fathers out there doing both the fathering and the mothering, even though sometimes ill-equipped to do so.

On This Mother's Day, Let Me Talk a Little About Parenting

A Fine Example of Parenting

One of the best examples of parenting comes to my mind every time I think about it. It was in the middle of summer, and I was painting one of the windows on the front of my house. Across the street and down one house, a father was painting his house as well. He was

up on a ladder with a brush and bucket of paint, while his Down's syndrome child was down below, complaining mightily about wanting to help paint. The complaining was persistent, and I was eavesdropping while pretending to pay attention to my own work.

So what does my neighbor do in this situation? He ended up doing what was for me a stroke of genius. He came down from the ladder, went inside, found a small bucket, filled it about half-full of water, and gave this child a brush with instructions that he could help his dad by painting a part of the house that the child was able to reach. The father went back up the ladder and finished his job, while the child down below was painting up a storm with water. Everybody was happy. It struck me as the perfect solution to what otherwise could have been a lousy situation.

A Second Example of Good Parenting

A second example was on the same street in the other direction, adjoining backyards, where there is a family with two preschool boys. I hear them every day. This is one of those families with two moms, one of whom gets out of work earlier than the other and brings the boys home with her from day care.

Typically the boys go out into the backyard to play. About ten minutes or so later something happens, which leads to an argument, a tussel, a fight, usually with complaining from one and crying from the other. Sometimes they are able to play a whole hour without an incident; other times it's only a couple of minutes.

What the mother does is deserving of sainthood — gentle, consistent, peaceful guidance steering them toward sharing their toys with

each other. Think of that as a concept, sharing toys! Oh my goodness, how wonderful! Little by little, day by day, gentle, consistent, peaceful guidance led them away from fighting. The boys will grow up to be fine, gentle, peaceful young men.

A Third Example of Good Parenting

A third example is not in my neighborhood within eavesdropping distance, but far away in Georgia, where my beloved sister raised two daughters, one of whom was in her teen years, and she dove deeply into anorexia. I'll spare you that story, but it was parenting in extremis. At times it was life or death, and as it tilted toward life, would this girl have any kind of future anyway? My sister and brother-in-law had to rise to the challenge, and they did.

Parenting is pretty important. But look with me for a moment at those three stories:

First, the father of the Down's syndrome child and the sterling example he was of coming up with just the right solution for a very upset child. And then the third one, parents going to an extreme for a child, rising to a difficult challenge and, thankfully, with a happy ending.

But it's that middle one that's curious to me, with the mom gently guiding two little boys toward a peaceful coexistence. That's the boring one, the mundane everyday one. How did that example rate becoming a sermon illustration? Shouldn't that be reserved for stories that are interesting and gripping rather than mundane, everyday stuff? Let's look more closely at that one.

But first, let me describe for you something from the realm of physics. It won't appear as

though this has anything at all to do with parenting at first. Trust me.

There Are Two Scenarios; **This Is the First One**

Several times I have seen slow-motion close-up videos of a drop of water coming down and landing into a very still pool of water. It's really beautiful to watch. What happens is this: The drop comes down, landing on the surface of the water, and ripples go out from the impact, but actually three drops go back up. The first one, the biggest, goes up only a couple of inches, and it forms a little sphere that's gone up two inches or so and comes back down and sits on the surface.

At this point, ripples in the water are going out, so the drip that went up and came back down sits on the surface sort of bobbing up and down for just a moment before it gets absorbed into the water below. Then, it in turn creates a new bunch of ripples and a new little drop — a tiny, microscopic drop that can't be seen with the naked eye. So the first drop comes down and three go up. The first one of the three that go up after the initial impact, I just described.

The second one of the three goes up, and it's also microscopic. This one you won't be able to see with your naked eye, unless you try very hard, because it's not even a millimeter around. This one goes up somewhere between a foot and 18 inches. It comes back down, but you hardly see the little ripple it makes when it lands. The third one goes up somewhere in the five- to six-foot range, but it's so small that it definitely cannot be seen with the naked eye. It's so small that it actually never lands; it evaporates before it can land again.

This Is the Second Scenario

The second scenario asks: What happens when that same drop of water comes back down, but instead of landing on a pool of water, it lands on a hard, flat surface. In particular, if that hard, flat surface is wet, then with a high-speed camera, you can see on the wetness where other little droplets land.

Coming down onto a hard surface, like a sheet of steel that's wet, the drop shatters, and it produces hundreds of other little microscopic drops. Only two or three of them would you be able to see with the naked eye. And if you were to look at the surface of that piece of steel upon which it lands, you would see that there are little microscopic drops in almost every square inch of a large piece of steel from one little drop.

Both of These Scenarios **Ripple out into the Universe**

Both of these scenarios — the drop with the little wave rippling out or the drop falling upon a hard, wet surface — are apt descriptions of what happens not only with our parenting but with our lives generally.

We know that what we say or do ripples out into the universe for good or for ill. Everybody knows that — the kind or the angry word, the compassionate or the vengeful act. And we all know of stories where we see the consequences of actions. For example, leaving an extra-large tip at a restaurant, and the waitress, often a single mom, and the child benefit from the generosity.

The interesting thing, though is that the benefit is largely beyond our view, beyond our perception. Nevertheless, it ripples out into the world, carrying its grace with it.

As to that second scenario, the drop hitting the hard, wet surface is a beautiful and extremely accurate analogy. Consider that every act of kindness, every act of love, every act of generosity, of peacemaking, of grace, of thanksgiving, of compassion is like one of those drops, even though we don't see all the effects. There might be 200 or 2,000 effects, but we see only two of them, one of them, perhaps even none. Yet every act of kindness, generosity, peacemaking, grace, thanksgiving, compassion, kindness, love is like one of those drops. Thousands of effects rippling out into the universe. We see only a few of them, a tiny percentage.

The thought that I would ask you to consider, to ask you to embrace on this Mother's Day is this:

The Spirit Is Ceaseless
in Its Parenting of You

Your acts of goodness and light in this world are like those drops of water — with multiple effects rippling out, widely scattered, that we cannot see — and only a few that we can see.

Also, the Spirit's work upon you is exactly the same. Thousands upon thousands of gentle nudgings and kind guidances from the Spirit, steering you in the way of life and peace, and you probably notice only a few of them.

Despite the limitations of our vision, of our perceptions, know in your heart, know in your soul that the Spirit is ceaseless in its parenting of you. And as well, know that every act of goodness you do ripples out, landing in places well beyond our perception, and they are never wasted.

Happy Mother's Day.