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Redwoods Presbyterian Church
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1 John 5:1-5
“Loving in spite of...”

Mothers love us in spite of everything! They love us in spite of our foibles and flaws. They never give up on their children. Rudyard Kipling wrote: “If I were dammed of body and soul, I know whose prayers would make me whole, mother o' mine o' mother o' mine.”

My sermon goes in the opposite direction. It's about a woman loving her abusive mother in spite of what she went through. I mentioned to a friend the subject of my sermon and she welcomed it. She said we hear a lot about the positive qualities of mothers on Mother's Day which is absolutely appropriate and said she welcomed this perspective since not everyone had a healthy relationship with their mother.

The biblical text, chosen by the lectionary, will interpret the woman's story from a spiritual perspective. Most of us had a great relationship with our mother. Even so, the sermon will help us relate in a supportive way with friends or family members who had difficult or abusive mothers.

The woman, a complete stranger, lives in another state. I met her recently by chance and her story prompted this sermon. She told me that she was seriously abused by what she described as a psychotic mother. Her father was career military and was away most of the time. After a couple of broken marriages she began psychoanalysis and accessed her faith.

Recently, her mother developed Alzheimer's and she left her home in southern California to help her through this period of life. I sensed by the way she spoke that her love was more than duty.

The writer of 1 John states: “Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God and everyone who loves the parent loves the child.”

To believe that Jesus is the Christ is to affirm that he was the one promised by God to usher in the realm of God whose adherents practice kindness and compassion. When one believes one *is* a child of God. As a child of God we love God. And everyone who loves the parent loves the child. It's circular. The stranger of my story came to love her parent because she learned to love herself as a beloved child of God.

1 John continues, verse 2: “By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments.”

We're not sure which commandments John refers to because the Gospels were not written at the time but we assume they are Jesus summation of the law which is to love

God with all our heart, with all our mind, with all our soul and with all our strength, and love our neighbor as our self.

What is love? Paul's 1 Corinthians 13 comes to mind: "Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." That's my meditation for the week. We know basically what it means to love as Christians.

If we truly love God and his commandments then we *will* love the children of God. Our inward and outward lives are integrated as was the life of the stranger in my story. She does not rejoice in wrongdoing and came to bear, believe, hope and endure all things. She came to claim the love she never had by caring for her mother. What else could she do with God's love?

Verse 3 and 4a: "For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome, for whatever is born of God conquers the world."

When one reads a phrase like "conquers the world" in the New Testament it means overcoming and eradicating the forces that have the potential to harm, abuse and destroy us. It's comforting to know that the power within us, Jesus, is greater than every negative and destructive power in the world.

The teller of today's story claimed this for her self in her many years of healing. Her work to love herself and others was freeing and releasing. She appropriated the words of Jesus who said: "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:29-30). That's 1 John obeying God's commandments. They are not burdensome.

Finally, verses 4b and 5: "And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith. Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?"

To trust Jesus is to allow the light of Jesus to shine in us to enlighten and heal us and to go out to be our best in our relationships with everyone in the world, including our parents. My friend, the stranger, did that.

The health website www.livestrong.com provides a psychology and Christianity that addresses issues of children with abusive mothers. It says:

People hope they can always rely on their mothers for love and protection. Unfortunately, it is a fact of life that not all mother-daughter/son relationships are healthy. It can be very difficult to overcome an abusive relationship with your mother. The wounds sustained in childhood can run deep. However, with determination and hard work, you can put the pain of your past behind you and move on to something better.

Step 1

Recognize that your mother's behavior is not about you. By accepting that you are not responsible for your mother's behavior, you can let go of any guilt or sense of failure you have carried over the years because it was impossible to please her.

Step 2

Tell the people you are close to about your experiences. Hopefully, members of your family will be able to offer you support, but if your family is divided between you and your mother, turn to other people you trust instead, such as your friends, your partner or your pastor.

Step 3

Seek professional help. With a therapist or as part of a support group, you'll have the opportunity to discuss the abuse you suffered in a safe, accepting environment, with people who understand what you've been through.

Step 4

Work toward forgiving your mother. Think of forgiveness as a gift you are giving yourself. You are letting go of any negative or vengeful feelings because you don't want to be trapped by your mother's bitterness or pain.

Final tips:

1. Healing is a process; do not expect too much from yourself too soon.
2. Your mother might not be willing to own up to her abusive behavior. Keep in mind that you cannot change anything about her; you can heal only yourself.
3. Pray for her, pray for yourself, pray for healing: Cover the whole situation with prayer.

God bless birth mothers, adoptive moms, step moms, foster mothers, surrogate moms, mothers-in-law, new moms and mothers-to-be whom lost their pregnancies. God bless the married, partnered and single moms. God bless the working mom and the stay at home mom. God bless and heal the difficult and abusive moms. God bless all women and God bless us and everyone. Amen.