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Genesis 21.14-21; John 19.25b-27
"Moms"

Based on my mom's life, my experience of my children's mom, the stories of Mary the mother of Jesus and moms near and far, I conclude without a shadow of doubt that moms are more deeply in touch with and engaged with their children than dads are. They experience more intimately the joys and sorrows of parenthood.

Union Seminary professor, Cornel West, speaking on the radio program KPFA, said that Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X and Nelson Mandela were their "Momma's child." Including himself, he said, "We are momma's child and daddy's kid." Momma's children know the special love of mothers, a love that nurtures and supports them and sees them through thick and thin like only mothers can.

I think I can speak persuasively about the joys of motherhood and the joy of having a mother but today I will speak about a mother's pain and the the amazing strength and caring of moms.

When I was a pastor in Staten Island, New York, an unkempt locally known homeless woman came to worship on Mother's Day. She entered the sanctuary after the service began and sat near the back of the church. The congregation continued in worship but I noticed that the space around the woman slowly widened as people edged away from her primarily due to an overwhelming odor. Before the benediction, she left as quietly as she had entered.

I thought of the woman's mom. We can only imagine how mothers of homeless people feel when their children hit rock bottom. It has to be painful.

There are good news stories. When Anna was a student at UC Santa Cruz, she volunteered at the Homeless Garden Project, a community-run, therapeutic way of tackling the homeless problem in the town. Homeless people participated in a two-acre garden, which grew organic fruits, vegetables and flowers, which they sold at markets and to investors in the garden with proceeds going to the homeless workers and to the upkeep of the project. Mothers must have been proud of their homeless children mending themselves in this way.

In another vein, a classic text in the New Testament recalling a mother's pain is the story read from the Gospel according to John. Jesus' mother watches her son crucified on the cross. Imagine doing that! Can we imagine a mother seeing her own child tortured and dying?

We recall the torture chambers of Abu Ghraib both during Saddam Hussein's day and during the occupation. Think of the rendition programs where people are tortured in secret cells around the world. Imagine how the parents of these people feel.

We have seen pictures of mothers holding up pictures of their disappeared children in Iraq, Argentina and other conflicted areas around the globe. Mary, the mother of Jesus, is one of those women.

Suellen and I saw the movie, "National Bird" last week about the US drone program. One of the drone bombings is shown through the cameras from a building in Sarasota, Florida. It portrays three trucks in Afghanistan believed to be carrying terrorists. Instead, it was a family of men, women and children returning home in a rural countryside. A drone bomber blasts the trucks one by one. Passengers from the last vehicle run for cover before the bombing of their vehicle.

The filmmaker interviews a partially surviving family in Afghanistan. The mother of two dead children and her son by her side with one leg amputated in the bombing is the spokesperson. Her pain is palpable. In many incidents, moms are the voices of the community's pain. It is the same the world over and throughout our checkered history.

More than 3,000 years ago, we read about a relationship between two mothers: Sarah and Hagar. Sarah is the wife of Abraham and Hagar is their slave. Both women bore Abraham's children.

Abraham consorts with Hagar when Sarah is unable to have children. Later Sarah gives birth to a child. Hagar's child is Ishmael and Sarah's is Isaac. Sarah is jealous and casts Hagar and Ishmael out of her home. Abraham does not like this but he goes along with his wife.

Today's story begins with Abraham setting Hagar on her way with some bread and water. Hagar wanders in the wilderness until the food runs out. They are weak and starving. Hagar anticipates the worst. She places her son under a bush and sits a distance away not wanting to watch him die. She weeps.

Through an angel, God hears their plight and encourages Hagar to hold fast to the boy's hand. She opens her eyes and sees a well of water, which provides for them for the rest of their lives.

Mothers throughout the world, especially those in war-torn and poverty areas suffer along with their children. Imagine how difficult it must be for a mother who cannot feed her own children. Refugees from Syria come to mind. Hagar was one of the first refugees and interestingly she is the mother of the one to whom Muslims regard as their primary patriarch. As God saved Hagar and Ishmael, God is doing the same for Arab and Islamic refugees today through our denomination and churches throughout the world who are directly helping refugees and encouraging governments to do so.

Mothers are often on the front line like the mother of six children feeling the pain of war, Julia Ward Howe, who proclaimed Mother's Day in 1870 as a passionate demand for disarmament and peace.

She said, "Arise, then, women of this day! Arise, all women who have hearts, whether your baptism be that of water or tears. . . Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn all that we have taught them of charity, mercy and patience. We women of one country will be too tender of those of another to allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs..."

"Let us solemnly take counsel with each other as to the means whereby the great human family can live in peace, each bearing after his/her own time the sacred impress, not of Caesars but of God."

Mothers against war and Black Lives Matter mothers are saying the same thing today.

Apart from engagement in protest and practical help, how do we remember our moms today on Mother's Day?

- We remember them for the good they do. For their faith, hope and love, let us praise God. My mother moved hell and high water for her children.
- For the not so good, let us offer them to God. If our mothers are difficult, let us pray for them and love them the best we can.
- For mothers who are hurting because their children have strayed or are ill or have failed to meet their expectations, or are suffering in some way, whatever, we pray that they may have God's comfort, peace, strength, love and understanding. We encourage them to let go of guilt and self-blame, if that is what they are feeling. We pray that they experience God's love and healing and may God heal and bless their children.

Most of us remember John Walker Lindh, the so-called Marin Taliban. A Marin mother said to me at the time of his apprehension, "We might disagree with what our children are doing but we are still their mothers and we will never stop loving them." We empathize and pray for mothers and their children everywhere.

On this final Sunday of Easter, let us resurrect love, peace and healing for mothers. Let us work for God's world of peace and loving justice for everyone, everywhere. Amen.