

“Mothering Into Ministry”

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Exodus 2:1-10; 1 Corinthians 16:13-14

July 20, 2003

Many of us will fondly remember that in May, this congregation held its annual Memorial Day retreat at St. Dorothy’s Rest in Sonoma County. There were many highlights of the weekend, but something special happened on the third day. In the beautiful porch room of Lydia House perched high above a ravine, the morning sun streamed through the broad windows while my husband Bob and I facilitated a discussion on spirituality and parenting. After all of the parents had introduced themselves, I led the group in a guided meditation in which I invited them to recall a particularly close and special moment with their children: a moment of deep connection, when both parent and child were filled with joy and love. As that image came into focus for them, I suggested that they consider that in that special moment, their child was the embodiment of God. The idea was that these powerful feelings of mutual love, care, awe and wonder are a direct gift from God. When the mothers and fathers around the room opened their eyes a few moments later, I was moved to see that many of them were wiping tears from their eyes. It had been a more powerful experience than I had anticipated. After that, the conversation moved on in a soulful and engaging way as we explored the meaning of our roles as parents, and that 75 minutes turned out to be one of the most rewarding elements of the retreat. The experience was an indication to me—the most recent of many-- that there is something sublime about the intersection of spirituality and parenting.

It is a topic that has captivated my attention in recent years. Over the last three years I have been absorbed by the often competing projects of becoming a mother, becoming a minister, and becoming the midwife to the birth of a new institution at the Swedenborgian House of Studies. The confluence of these events has given me ample opportunity to reflect upon what it means to mother and to minister, and over time I have begun to see that the qualities they have in common serve to strengthen and empower the other. This morning, as we’ve gathered here to recognize my ordination, I’d like to talk with you about what ministry means, and by extension, what motherhood means. My hope is that we might consider how we are all participants in the mothering of divine creation.

In our scripture reading we heard the story of the birth of Moses, which one might also say is the story of Moses’ two mothers. In the midst of a hostile social environment in which an edict has been issued that all newborn boys are to be killed, a Hebrew woman gives birth. And in a very familiar story, she creates a raft for her baby and sets him in the reeds on the banks of the river in order to save his life. The baby happens to be found by none other than Pharaoh’s daughter, who decides she wants him as her son. When the baby’s clever older sister shrewdly asks Pharaoh’s daughter if she would like a Hebrew woman to nurse the child, an ingenious solution is found whereby the illicit baby is allowed to be raised by his natural mother. When the child is grown, Pharaoh’s daughter brings him into the royal home and raises him as her own.

In the literal sense of the passage, what we see are three women who are doing some very creative problem-solving in the face of unbearable conditions. These women

are caring, resourceful, crafty and committed to sustaining human life even when it means contradicting a stringent societal law. What's more, both the Hebrew woman and Pharaoh's daughter were mothers. They both participated in nurturing a human life with immense potential—for as we know, the baby Moses grew up to play one of the most important roles in the salvation history of the Hebrew people.

Swedenborg believed that this passage had another level of meaning, and in that sense we find that this passage speaks of the Lord's glorification process. The baby Moses signifies the Lord Jesus Christ who began his life fully human and whose divinity grew and developed over time. In this passage, baby Moses being cared for by his mother signifies the first instance of divine truth being instilled into the Lord. So we can see that in the mothering act an essential connection is made between ourselves and God. As we grow through life, it is this connection with God that sustains and nurtures us.

This scriptural passage speaks to the spiritual and theological dimensions of both motherhood and ministry. It seems to me that motherhood and ministry share at least three core values, and that the understanding of each is enhanced by juxtaposition with the other.

First, in its most fundamental sense, ministry is about attending to the growth and development of human life, and that's exactly what mothering is about as well. In ministry we recognize that all humans are in a growth process which—if they choose to embrace it-- will lead them to life in heaven. The journey of life will contain trials and temptations, loss and grief, and joy and understanding. The role of a minister is to facilitate that growth and to open channels for it to move through. A minister cannot control the growth of her faith community, nor can she ever solve anyone else's problems for them. But she can be there to listen, to encourage, to teach, and to create a sacred space for spiritual growth. In the same way, a mother cannot sculpt her children or dictate their development. Rather, her role is to provide a container in which healthy growth can occur.

As the story of Moses' birth signifies the uniting of the Lord's divine with his human, we encounter what is arguably the most transformative concept in Christian theology and one which held central importance for Swedenborg: the divine human. This is the second shared value between ministry and motherhood. The fact that Jesus Christ became both human and divine is a message to us that the place where we encounter the divine is precisely through our humanity. Swedenborg's metaphysical framework affirms this over and over again—that the natural and the spiritual, form and essence, truth and love are inseparably intertwined. We do not encounter God by isolating ourselves in lofty piety, but only, in fact, by embracing life and love in the present moment.

In his book *Parent as Mystic, Mystic as Parent*, writer David Spangler speaks of how centrally this concept of the immanent united with the transcendent plays itself out in parenting. Children require their mothers and fathers to be simultaneously aware of miraculous birth and messy, everyday drudgery. One moment a mother is beholden by the beauty of the human creation that was placed in her care by God, and the next moment she is exasperated by the messiness or the obstinacy of this divine creation! It is this practice that teaches us that the awareness of the divine is found in being attentive to the wonder as well as to the frustration of life in the present moment.

One night recently my daughter climbed into bed next to me in the middle of the night, and a few hours later I awoke with a start. In that moment of perceptive consciousness between sleep and wakefulness, I was suddenly startled by the fact that there was a little human being lying next to me who my husband and I had created and who had come from my own body! It *is* rather miraculous, but I don't often notice it. It is the same way with our very existence on earth. It is a miracle that we are all here! It is a miracle that we have all been created in love by God and that the purpose of our lives is to become spiritually whole! It is the job of both mothers and ministers to foster awareness of the divine indwelling humanity.

The third value that mothering and ministering have in common is the understanding that human life is at the same time fragile and surprisingly powerful. The baby Moses, sentenced to death before he was even born, was placed precariously in a small basket and left by a river. A tiny human being who could have died very easily grew up to save thousands of people. Humans are weak—we get sick, we make mistakes, we lack intelligence, we hurt other people. And at the same time humans are breathtakingly beautiful. We inspire, we create, we change, we heal, we bring a new world into being. This is what it means to be human. We have the potential to bring about nothing less than the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ through our hearts and minds when we love God who brought us into being.

So I am thrilled at being ordained as a minister, because I believe in the power of spirituality to change people. When we strive to live the best way we know how, letting love become our highest value, we begin to change the world. *Spirituality matters*. As I now set forward on the path of ordained ministry, I will heed these words from 1 Corinthians. They are words we should all take to heart as we move forward with the blessed project of living our spiritual lives in this world: “Keep alert, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love.” Amen.