

## EASTER SIX, YEAR B, MAY 9, 2021

In honor of Mother's Day I thought I would say a few words about what mothers teach us. These are sometimes referred to as momilies which, I believe, crosses over to many cultures and if you know them say them right along with me.

My mother taught me about religion. "You'd better pray that will come out of the carpet." My mother taught me about foresight: "Make sure you wear clean underwear in case you are in an accident." My mother taught me logic: "Because I said so, that's why." Mothers teach irony: "Keep laughing and I'll give you something to cry about." How about the science of osmosis: "Shut your mouth and eat your dinner." Mothers teach contortionism: "Will you look at the dirt on the back of your neck." Mothers teach stamina: "You'll sit there till you've eaten every bite on your plate." Mothers have taught about hypocrisy: "If I told you once, I've told you a thousand times, don't exaggerate." Mothers have taught us about envy: "There are millions of less fortunate children in this world who don't have such a wonderful mother."

These momilies have grounded us as we grew up and are rooted in our memory banks. You could be halfway across town, hanging out with friends, getting ready to do the one thing most likely to get you "grounded" until the Second Coming, when all of a sudden you would hear that voice and see that wagging finger: "Don't you dare do anything that will embarrass me."

No number of years will erode the memories. No matter how old you are you can still hear your mother's voice as clearly as you did at age twelve. Our mother's voice never leaves us. And perhaps the one momilie that has shaped more kids is, "You better act like somebody."

Many of us know that the intent of these words was to remind us that we are important, that someone cared about us, that our lives are significant, and that we are accountable for what we do with our lives. As the saying goes there's nothing like a mother's love. Most moms will give their lives for their children and do anything for them because we do know a mother's love is fierce and strong.

Well, today's gospel lesson is all about love. In a way it starts with a mother's love and what our mothers have taught us about love. But when Jesus says, "This is my commandment that you love one another, I realize this is what all of us must teach our children.

Now, on the face of it, this is a weird commandment. Can we be ordered to love? Most of us would say no. We usually think of love as spontaneous and free-flowing. We fall in love. Love is blind, it happens at first sight, it breaks our hearts, and its course never runs smooth.

Even if we put our cultural clichés aside, we know that authentic love can't be manipulated, simulated, or rushed. Have you ever tried to command your children or grandchildren to love. It's a lesson in futility. The most we can do is insist that our children behave as if they love: "Share your toys." "Say sorry." "Don't hit." "Use kind words." But these actions — often performed with gritted teeth and rolling eyes — aren't the same as what Jesus is talking about in John's Gospel. He doesn't give his disciples or us the easy "out" of doing nice things with clenched, resentful hearts. Nothing feels as hollow as a "loving" act performed lovelessly.

No, when Jesus says, “Love as I have loved you,” he’s not talking about touchy feely kind of love but authentic feeling, honest engagement and generous action. Think of it this way. Jesus loves us all, broken and difficult as we might be, without regard to where we live or what we eat or how we pray or who we love...or can’t manage to love. He simply loves us. His love is as solid as a mother’s love.

Think about someone you find hard to love. Is it someone in public life? Or maybe a whole group of people? Maybe it’s someone long dead but still rankling you. Is it someone close to home?

Just thinking about that we know love is not all hearts and flowers. It’s work. It wears us out. Love is not just a noun describing a romantic feeling but real love is a verb we choose to live out from one day to the next. It’s not easy or painless.

I know this sounds as if Jesus is asking for the impossible but imagine what would happen to us if we took this commandment seriously. How would we have to change? If we’re honest, most of the time we want to choose the people we love based on our own affinities and preferences — not on Jesus’s all-inclusive commandment. Charitable actions are easy. But changing one’s heart to love as Jesus loves. That is hard.

As I said, love wears us out in the giving and the receiving of it. So, what can we do? Where must we begin? Jesus offers a single, straightforward answer: “Abide in my love.” Just like last week’s Gospel, where Jesus used the metaphor of the vine and branches, he calls us once again to abide. He is calling us to cling to and make ourselves at home not simply in him, but in his love. It is what we call agape love – divine love that finds its roots in the heart of God.

God love is beyond our wildest imaginations. God loves us, with tremendous patience, and I imagine a good sense of humor and we are loved not because we deserve it but because God wants to do it. God loves us when we are, in some respects, seemingly unlovable. God loves us whether we love God back or not. God’s love is unconditional, in the sense that it is given freely, and not because of anything we have said or done or felt. Indeed, God’s love is often given in spite of what we have said or done or felt. It is pure grace—God’s unmerited favor, God’s undeserved, unearned benefit freely and lavishly poured out by God into our lives. This is the love that Jesus calls us to abide in.

But abiding in something is not the same as emulating it. In the vine-and-branches metaphor, Jesus’s love is not our example; it’s our source. It’s where our love originates and deepens. Where it replenishes itself. In other words, if we don’t abide, we can’t love as he calls us too. Jesus’s commandment to us is not that we wear ourselves out, trying to conjure love from our own easily depleted resources. Rather, it’s that we abide in the holy place where divine love becomes possible. That we make our home in Jesus’s love — the most abundant and inexhaustible love in existence.

The commandment — or better yet, the invitation — is to drink our fill of the love of Christ so it spills over and out of us to bless others. It’s as simple and as complicated as that. And that invitation has implications for the way we talk to each other and the way we interact with each other. It means love the stranger and the inconvenient... love the ungrateful and the annoying... love the broken and the destitute... love the aged and the addicted. They are all our family and neighbors who we are called to love.

Jesus’ agape commands us to be intentional, sacrificial, and universal every day, with each person, and all situations. That’s incredibly hard – that’s why we return to the

source of Jesus' love for a fresh refilling over and over again. This is where we learn to abide. "Love one another as I have loved you."

May this commandment to love one another become our lifestyle, our truth, our understanding for in the end it's all about God's empowering, enduring, embracing, and unconditional love that is fiercer than a mother's love who calls us to abide in God's eternal love. Amen.