

## **So Many Things**

A Sermon for Mother's Day preached by Pilar Millhollen, May 13<sup>th</sup>, 2018

Readings: "M Is For The Many Things" (*Alyce McKenzie*); "May Means Mother's Day" (*Katie Lee Crane*)

Just a few days ago, I got to visit my friend Laura, who for the past six months has been juggling touring with Chicago the Musical and traveling back to her hometown in Huntsville, AL to care for her mother Wynn, who was diagnosed with brain tumors late last year. Laura is a woman whom I've come to call one of the Shakespeare ladies: though she be but little, she is fierce. Fiercely funny, fiercely loving, fiercely creative. And 5'2". She introduced us to her mama, Francis Wynn Hamilton Oldham, last year while we were briefly in Chattanooga and Wynn came to hang out with her daughter, who always called Wynn not just her mama, but really her best friend. I quickly realized why, as Wynn was as vivacious, friendly and seemingly a little bit nutty right upon meeting her, a slightly older and definitely rounder version of Laura. Though we didn't get to know Wynn well, she became infamous through Laura's stories that would crack us up and also inspire us. Wynn, through Laura's experience, was like a Saturday Night Live-version of the classic white southern matriarch. Real hospitable, real gracious, and alternately suspiciously liberal, a little foul-mouthed and irreverent. After Laura was born and she stopped teaching, she called herself "community volunteer," creating arts programs for children and seniors all over town. As her health declined, her wit did not...some classics included Laura saying, "Mom, you can't grow weed, but you can grow a tumor," while Wynn replied, "I'd like some weed." Or, Laura reporting, "Just as I thought Mom wasn't really with it anymore, out comes her favorite song, 'I don't care if it rains or freezes, long as I got my plastic Jesus, riding on the dashboard of my car.'" It was clear to anyone who knew Laura that her talent, her humor, and her deep loyalty and kindness were direct results of Wynn's parenting, and it became clear that anyone who knew Wynn could see the deep bond the two had as Laura stepped in to take a long leave of absence from work to care for her up until last week, when on May 1<sup>st</sup>, the cancer overtook her body and she died peacefully at home with Laura by her side.

Mother's Day holds so much emotion for so many of us. It can be a day of total celebration, a day where adult folks reconnect with their parent or mother figure. It can be a day where endlessly-working mothers raising children get a little break, or at least maybe somebody makes them pancakes instead of the other way around. It can be bittersweet, for those who've lost beloved mothers or mother figures; and it can also hold sensitive and fraught feelings for those who are estranged from their mothers or children for a variety of reasons, or never had a mother or a child that they desperately needed or wanted, or for those who have painfully experienced the loss of not a parent but a child.

So how we do go about honoring a day that holds so much meaning on so many fronts for each of us? As I was looking at the revised common lectionary this week, from which I ordinarily preach, there were no passages suggested that had anything to do with this day. And while I was visiting Laura, I got to hear stories about "aggressive Wynn," as she and her high school friends used to call her, I got to see videos of the love that the community poured out without ceasing as soon as news of her diagnosis spread...And as the stories shifted, from funny and sweet toward the very painful and challenging reality of 35-year-old Laura, her only daughter, physically caring for the once youthful and energetic

65-year-old Wynn, I put the lectionary away so I could hear God a little better through Laura's experience.

Have you ever read or heard about the book *Love You Forever*? It's a picture book written by children's author Robert Munsch, and it's based on what started for Munsch as a song in his head. The lyrics go, "I'll love you forever, I'll like you for always, as long as I'm living, my baby you'll be." Munsch went on to craft a story about a mother who sings this song all throughout her son's life – from the first moment she held him after he was born, through his terrible twos and teenage years as he grows up and she navigates being a single parent. The song acts as everything from a lullaby to a reminder that the mother uses for herself when she's about to pull her hair out dealing with her wild 5-year-old's antics. The book follows the two as the son becomes an adult and moves "all the way to the other side of town," where comically, the mother would occasionally come over to his house, sneak into his room at night, and softly sing the same lyrics, like a kind of prayer that no matter where he was, or who he became from year to year, she would always love him, like him, and as long as she lived, he would be her child. But time moves on, and the mother becomes older, and gets very sick. The son comes home to care for her, and she tries to sing the song, but she can't. So he picks her up as she did with him so many times, and he sings to her, "I'll love you forever, I'll like you for always, as long as I'm living, my mommy you'll be." The final page of the book shows the son coming home very late that night, slowly climbing the stairs to his own newborn daughter's bedroom, where he watches her sleep, and then picks her up from her crib, rocks her, and sings the familiar refrain to her.

I couldn't help but think of this book as Laura and I visited. Not only for the incredible blessing of the parental love from the mother that transcended anything the son did or any difficulties they faced together, but for the role reversal that so often goes overlooked or untalked about. Mothers, in whatever form they take, tend to become figures on whom so many people rely for so many things, that the inevitable reality of growing old, sometimes accompanied by illness, is particularly difficult to grapple with when the adult child must in essence take on the role that the mother has filled for so long, and the mother must surrender to being cared for in the way that she always did for the child. This does not happen for everyone, but it happens a lot more often that we like to acknowledge – and there is a deep vulnerability in such a role reversal that includes a kind of spiritual surrender to the forces of nature that at their best, manifest in the same love that the divine envelops each of us in. Our first reading, by minister Alyce McKenzie, expresses this so succinctly when she rethinks the old poem that glorifies some idealized archetype of mother that never really existed. Instead, as she says, "M is not for the million things you have to do today or better do tomorrow to be the perfect Hallmark mom. M is for the many things God's wisdom provides for us in the difficult roles each of us fills in life." The real mother, the complete and whole and human mother, whether she be parent or child, is not being asked to, or rather should not be asked to, play God. As McKenzie points out, vulnerability, and helplessness, and weakness, and poverty were scorned in Jesus' culture and, I would argue, are still scorned today. Which is why her picture of Jesus' invitation to let the children come to him, in their imperfect, helpless state, with a revised litany of what he was really saying, reveals so much more about the complexity of mothering and the willingness to be mothered in our infinite fragility and exquisite vulnerability. "Let those who are not fulfilling everybody's expectations for your role in life, come to me," she says. "You who have serious doubts about whether you can handle what lies ahead, come to

me...You who seethe with resentment toward your parents, come to me...you who are overburdened, doing the work of two people, come to me.”

The last few months of Wynn’s life, Laura became a mother to her mother and her father, whose health has also been poor. “Ya know,” she says, “it gets real when you go from emptying bedpans to physically doing for Mom what you know she did for me when I was a baby.” Though Wynn kept her humor and the neighbors provided meal after meal for the family, Laura gradually stepped into Wynn’s role, with the stress, the heartache, and also the unconditional love that would do anything for this person, who had done the same for her. But also, Wynn allowed the shift to happen. Old “aggressive Wynn,” who was always doing, and creating, and serving others, as so many, many women do as biological, adoptive, and symbolic mothers, allowed herself to surrender. And that is the act of a warrior who has been touched by the holy. “Let those who know they can no longer do this alone, come to me.” If that isn’t an act of holy courage, I don’t know what is.

I don’t know exactly what Mother’s Day means for each of you. But I imagine that, like Laura, like the mother and son in the *Love You Forever* book, which Robert Munsch only recently revealed came out of the process that he and his wife experienced after both of their first biological children were stillborn, Mother’s Day holds multiple and deep-running feelings. And it is an equally holy act to acknowledge such feelings and honor the multiple experiences that each of us have with the identities of mothering. Rev. Katie Lee Crane, who wrote our second reading, reminds us of the holiness in those who are excluded from the traditional narratives that claim motherhood or mothering or mother as a narrowly defined category. “There are no cards for women who gave up children for adoption,” she reminds us, “no cards for women who have lost children of any age or for the women whose children have abandoned them in anger.” I would also add, for the children whose mothers have abandoned or mistreated them; for our many ancestors whose children were taken from them because they were not regarded as human beings but as property; for our precious neighbors who send their children across borders in sacrificial hope that they might save their lives; for the women, and men, who have taken on the role of mothering one or multiple children, small and grown, in non-traditional ways but who have laid down that divine kind of love that says, come to me, in whatever state you are: helpless, alienated, enraged, elated, fearful, disabled, despondent, addicted. I am here for you. I’ll try and take care of you. I’ll forgive you. I’ll hold you accountable. I’ll do the best I can, and do my best to see you for who you are. The kind of love that gives of itself without expecting return. It is the closest kind of love to that which the divine gives us, a human manifestation of that which engulfs us but cannot quite be named, cannot fully be expressed, and cannot ever be adequately measured. It is, in essence, the same radical love that we read of in the poems of Sufi mystics, in the Bhagavad-Gita, and in the gospel. So on this day, let us honor all of you who have walked the revolutionary road of mothering, from the more traditional to the unusual. For you who have kept going when you thought you couldn’t, for you who have experienced beauty and anguish, for you who did what many others cannot do. Today, we see you. We recognize you. We lift you up, in thanksgiving for the impossible task that you have taken on and in petition that God make you stronger for the journey ahead. We bless you. We celebrate you. We love you. May God hold you in the light and anoint you in your roles. Amen.