

From the Community Pulpit
“Letter to My Mother”

Text: I Corinthians 13:13

Sermon by Dr. Robert Lee Hill

Mother’s Day, Sunday, May 9, 2010

8:30, 9:20, and 10:45 a.m.

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I Corinthians 13:8-12

8 Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. 9 For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; 10 but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. 11 When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. 12 For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. 13 So faith, hope, love abide, these three. But the greatest of these of love.

Today, for the purposes of this morning’s proclamation, three dynamics have come together in a compelling confluence.

(1) Today is Mother’s Day, which, while not on the official liturgical calendar of the church, is certainly written on the heart of American culture. Since its beginnings – initiated by Julia Ward Howe, as a way to champion peace, after the deadliness of the Civil War, and then under the inspiring leadership of Anna Jarvis in 1908, when she sought out the second Sunday of May as a way for children to honor their mothers, until President Woodrow Wilson declared it an official U.S. holiday 96 years ago in 1914 – Mother’s Day has been a touchstone for sentiment and assessment, for honoring and remembrance. Still, the Church in the U.S. has endured an uneasy connection with Mother’s Day, not wanting to be superficial or overly sentimental about such an important dynamic as motherhood. But, as Faulkner was quick to remind us, if we are afraid of sentiment, we are afraid of being human. So, with respectful acknowledgment of tradition, but also with acute recognition that we always owe more to God than we do to culture, let us always celebrate our mothers by recalling the wisdom of the Yiddish proverb: “God could not be everywhere, so God made mothers.”

(2) Today is also the culmination of our “*All You Need is ...LOVE ... is The Greatest*” sermon series, as we place an emphasis on verse thirteen in the thirteenth chapter of the apostle Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians: “So faith, hope, love abide, these three. But the greatest of these of love.” If we are going to attend to Mother’s Day with a solid measure of integrity, we ought to talk ultimately about love.

(3) In preparation for this sermon I’ve been inspired by Wendell Berry’s recollection¹ of Wallace Stegner’s belated letter-like encomium for his mother.² And, since Paul’s mode of proclamation to the Corinthians was an epistolary one, it seems meet and right so to preach in a similar way, that is, in the form of a letter.

Thus, this morning, please offer me your forbearance for my being tied to a manuscript. Receive this sermon as a loving way of searching the meanings of faith, hope and love, and, as the Ten Commandments charges us to do, honoring our mothers, and, indeed, casting a loving gaze upon all mothers.

Dear Mother:

Like I do every year, I remembered your birthday this past Thursday, May 6. It's even programmed into my Blackberry. Call me sentimental. You would have been 84 this past week. So much has transpired in the 39 years since you died one month after I graduated from high school. I remember clearly coming to your hospital room at M.D. Anderson Hospital in Houston with diploma in hand, and showing you the tassel and the Polaroid pictures. I remember, too, the palpable sense of regret that suffused the room that night. But I also remember your pride as a single mother and our mutual gladness and glee that I was granted that huge Champion Paper scholarship that would make possible my release into a boundless future.

FAITH

On this particular Mothers Day, I want to recall some things about Faith, Hope, and Love, how you lived them out so wonderfully. These, of course, are the three premier virtues lifted up by the apostle Paul. More importantly, to me, these are also the values by which you lived your 45 very full years on this earth.

It was by faith that you dragged us to' church, which became the incarnation of faith for us. I don't remember church or anything else much about Stephenville or Hico, Texas. (Although I do remember learning to spell my name in Hico- easy enough since I only had to learn two letters, "B" and "O" - and repeating it , "B-O-B," to every person passing by my perch on the curb.) But I can never forget Brownsville and the dulcet tones of Rev. Ivan Dugan's voice and his steadfast hand in the baptistry. I know you were proud on that Easter Sunday when I was baptized. Surely this wiped away your shock and embarrassment from the time when I pulled that tantrum at the back of the church, screaming and kicking the pews, and yelled out at the elder at the communion table, "*I don't like that man's voice!*"

It was by faith that you kept Becky and Mary Beth, and me going to church, each and every Sunday, not only there but also in Pasadena, Texas, where we came under the strong influence of another minister, Rev. Roy Daniel, and his wife, Annetta. You always said that anyone could have a

good life if they had a good doctor, a good school, and a good church. We were blessed to enjoy all three. These days, I spend significant portions of time trying to share that vision and gladly joining with a host of other folks worried that such community pillars are vastly compromised. I'm grateful for you seeing that we had such strong foundations in the communities wherever we lived.

It was by faith that you guided us in our participation in communion which remains a tremendous mystery and a necessary weekly ritual for me. Communion is frequently connected with family and, I must admit, some homey associations. Some Sundays, the grape juice in the cup reminds me of the grape jelly in my favorite sandwich, and then I think back to that faithful nurture you always provided your brood of three. And that's not a bad association for communion, come to think about it. Nurture and care and the benevolent grace of a saving grape scent.

It was also by faith that you urged us to read the Bible and take its precepts seriously. I still have the Revised Standard Version of the Bible you bought a year after I was born. That was a radical act, now that I look back on it, given how so many Texans believed then that the Bible had been originally written in English, with an Elizabethan lilt, to boot, so revered in the King James Version of the Bible.

I suppose I'm saying that your own faithfulness foreshadowed any sense of faithfulness that I would come to experience. Becky, Mary Beth, and I all remember to this day the great shadow your good life cast on our lives. And we have a symbolic remembrance of that shadow in a picture you once took of us in front of the Astrodome in Houston. Your physical presence is not in the photo but the faith-filled shadow of your head is, as you were taking the picture of our motley crew.

HOPE

But more important than faith was your undying hopefulness, even up to and throughout your five-year battle with a deadly version of hepatitis.

You were always so full of hope and the forward look. I remain thankful, abidingly so, that you took me with you when you went to the levees on the Rio Grande River to give hope-filled vaccines and inoculations to impoverished children of immigrants. As I recall, some of the kids were near my age. I can't remember a specific child or a group of children, but I always have remembered that you wanted to provide whatever hope you could to some very poor kids, and you wanted me to see the living situations of folks who had less than we did. I do recall one specific home we visited. It was really more like a shack. I recollect that you didn't flinch at all, you didn't show anything but gentle kindness to the family we visited and to me, when I blurted out that I wanted to have dirt floors in my room back in our home just like the floors in the places we were visiting.

There's no telling what your hopes for the three of us were before you died. If you did express such hopes, I don't remember what they were. And we weren't old enough to conjure up mature futures for ourselves and discuss them with you. But I can't help but think that you'd say we fulfilled some good hopes which you probably would have had if you had lived long enough to know us in our adult years.

We all three managed to graduate from college. Somehow we figured that the expectation of "going to college" was non-negotiable.

Becky and Mary Beth and I have all managed to stay out of trouble, at least the kinds of trouble that are uninteresting or scandalous, the sorts that stunt human progress. On the other hand, we've known challenging trouble and sometimes plenty of it. But we've come through daunting times with our souls in tact and our spirits unbowed.

You'd be so proud of your grandchildren. Four are in college and the other one will follow along, once he's graduated from high school. Christopher graduates from Virginia Tech next week, and he's already been accepted into pharmacy graduate school. Each of your grandchildren, my niece and nephews, live with hope, a hope that I believe you instilled in us, especially in your darkest days, even when life was ebbing away. The exemplary hopefulness you embodied in your life keeps us going, no matter what.

By the way, you made a great decision to have Uncle Doc be Mary Beth and Becky's legal guardian. It was excruciatingly painful for them to have you gone, but Uncle Doc and Aunt Margaret provided stability and reassurance in a difficult time. They stood in the gap, and it's hard to imagine what would have transpired if they had not been there as Becky and Mary Beth processed through school toward college.

LOVE

Most of all you taught us love and to be ready to receive and to share and to give love in all of its manifestations.

You never got to meet Priscilla but we both feel your presence and I know you'd love her, fully and unfettered. I like to think that, since you're part of the Saints Eternal, you love us both even now and accompany our progress over time.

You never got to meet Dick and Hazel Blaisdell, who took me in from the cold as their own son, beginning one September day in my freshmen year at TCU. But I know you'd love them. It was a big jump for me to allow such a family to welcome me into their hearts, but I'm profoundly glad and grateful I did. They were present at my ordination, in the form of a communion chalice that they

specially provided then, and they were beaming at Priscilla and me on our wedding day at the Danforth Chapel in Lawrence, Kansas. They could never take your place, but they have done well to stand in your stead.

You never got to hear me preach as an adult. But I can assure you that I've developed a bit since you suffered through those artless articulations which were supposed to be sermons back in my high school days. The scripture is stunningly on target: *"When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways."* By the way, Mammy³ was exactly right also when she said, during one family Thanksgiving dinner, I wasn't religious enough to be a minister. I had no idea of how religion ("re-ligamenting") could be so important and necessary and heart-breaking and soul-mending and jaw-droppingly wonderful. But I've come to find out it can and is.

I wish you could see how caring love is lived out in the laboratory of love that is Community Christian Church. We're not perfect, God knows. No institution ever is. But here and there, in a Sunday morning prayer or in a song that stays sung or in a moment of poignant offering or in an embrace of tender support or in a jubilant celebration or in an act of generous justice on behalf of those who are suffering and hungry and lonely and hopeless, the kingdom of God can be seen here. My goodness, sometimes it even saturates our senses and we taste a heavenly banquet! And sometimes the loving care is so vivid, so unabashedly given, and we are so unashamedly awash in it, that we feel like children, like babies really, ready and eager to explode and to laugh and laugh and laugh!

Just a few more words of thanks before I sign off. I can't thank you enough for teaching me that 45 years of age might be a brief span of time to live, but it can still be a full span if the arc of one's progress through time and the specifics of one's daily activities are saturated with love. While the sky of our intentions may not be matched by the earth of our performance,⁴ we can never be faulted for seeking to live lives of love. Such seeking keeps us close to one another, in close proximity to our best selves, and, in the end, ever closer and more intimately fused into the very heart of God. So ... thank you, thank you, thank you.

By the way, there are innumerable things I can't remember about you, no matter how hard I try.

I can't recall you singing or humming, ever. But I know that you prized the magic of music because you made us go to those blasted piano lessons and band practice and choir rehearsals.

I can't remember you ever wearing a fancy dress. You sacrificed so much for our family. And

such sacrifice did not go unnoticed, even if we were too immature to express our appreciation.

I can recall only one special dish you ever cooked, banana pudding, but that is holy enough.

I can't recall any conversation we ever had about books. But I know you championed reading and expanding our minds and our lives by using language to travel to other lands and times and experiences and peoples.

But one thing I do recall. I remember how you always put your best countenance forward, leaning into the world, leaning into life, wanting to enjoy it, and, in fact, enjoying it, and enjoying it so much you would laugh, and laugh, and laugh. You were like countless other mothers and like unlike the One you followed as Savior, the One who was and is Love Incarnate: no circumstance and no one ever took your life; you simply, faithfully, hopefully, lovingly gave it. And with such a merciful memory, what else can I ever say on the second Sunday of May but "Happy Mother's Day!"

Lovingly proud to be your son,

Bob

AMEN.

NOTES

- 1 *"In Memory: Wallace Stegner, 1909-1993,"* in *Imagination in Place: Essays* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2010), p. 47.
- 2 *"Letter, Much Too Late,"* in *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs: Living and Writing in the West* (New York: Random House, 1992), pp. 22-33.
- 3 *"Mammy"* is our family's name for our grandmother, my mother's mother.
- 4 I'm pretty sure I first heard Fred Craddock use this fetching phrase (*"sky of... earth of..."*), but maybe I've confused my memory with another saint's wording. I can't seem to find any place where Fred or any one else is actually recorded to have said or written it. Still, I'm grateful for it, from wherever and whomever it came.