

SERMON for May 8, 2016 (7 Pascha C)
Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary

Texts: Revelation 22:12-21; Psalm 97; John 17:20-26
Themes: unity, Mother's Day, motherhood, the close relationships matter most
Title: You loved me before the foundation of the world

Jesus prayed for his disciples and said, "As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me."

You know, this would be the perfect Gospel reading for Father's Day!
The message of this text, however, remains the same, even if this day is one in which we remember and celebrate all of the Mothers in our lives.

John's Gospel intends to open the door for a public view into a very private and intimate relationship. Here Jesus speaks with the one he calls Abba. And he prays that all of those who will eventually place their trust in him – including you and me – may have a share in that intimacy which exists within God's own being.

"As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us."

It's as if all of the ministry of Jesus – all of his healing, his preaching, and his teaching – was possible because of this foundational love which existed before time and for ever.

And that's how the home works, doesn't it? I mean, when it works well, as it should. When a home, and the family living in it, is healthy and connected and working together in harmony.

Let me tell you the story of an amazing woman who built a foundation of love upon which her children were able to build strong and meaningful lives. It's the story of a woman named Susanna Wesley.

Susanna was born in January of 1669 in London, England.
She was the daughter of a prominent dissenting (Protestant) pastor. However, at the age of 13, she came to the conclusion that the dissenters were wrong and that the Church of England was the correct way to practice the faith. So she left her father's congregation to join the neighborhood Anglican parish – at age 13!
Here is an early sign of this strong woman's eventual resolve and willpower!

In this new Anglican parish is where she met her future husband, Samuel Wesley, who went on to study at Oxford and was ordained in the Church of England.

This young couple struggled through the first few years of entry-level salaries, even living once in Lincolnshire in a one-room mud hut rectory with no glass at all in the windows, only shutters to keep out the cold and wind.

Gradually, their circumstances improved and Susanna went on to bear 17 children. Seventeen! And if that fact was not amazing enough, it is compounded by the reality that 9 of these children died while still in infancy.

On average, Susanna gave birth to one child each year in the beginning part of her marriage. Can you imagine how difficult this must have been?

Well, on top of the physical challenges of her life, Susanna Wesley ran a tightly organized household. She had no choice about this.

They were too poor to hire much help. So on top of all of her household duties, she conducted day school for her youngsters, instructing them in the Christian faith alongside of their academics.

In addition to their home schooling, each child had chores to perform, Scriptures to memorize, and character issues to address.

And to make sure that all of this formational work was proceeding as desired, each child had a scheduled, personal audience with their mother, Susanna, every week, for one-on-one attention, correction and encouragement.

Sometimes I am tempted to complain that my life is too busy and hectic and frantic. But compared to a life like that of Susanna Wesley, my life is a walk in the park!

Of course, her life was much like that of countless other women in her era.

The reason we know about her particular story at all is that two of her sons, John and Charles Wesley, went on to launch Methodism, which is a global movement of churches which continues to grow even today.

Susanna is sometimes called “the Mother of Methodism” since the carefully structured and ordered life which she developed in her household is reflected in the discipline and order of the Methodist system developed by her sons.

In contrast to the Church of England in that time, in which religious duties generally fell to clerics and spiritual oversight was often rather lax, Methodism emphasized small household groups in which every member was accountable for Bible study, mutual

correction and encouragement, and productive service in society. Which sounds quite a bit like the weekly meetings which Susanna held with her children!

Sadly, she only lived long enough to see the very beginning of her son John's movement.

It is doubtful that she could have ever imagined that her sons, building on many of the life teachings that they learned from her, would go on to serve as spiritual leaders and inspirations for tens of millions of people around the world.

My friends: does it matter what we do in our homes, in the privacy and intimacy of our homes?

I mean, in all honesty, how we speak to one another, how to treat one another, whether or not we make the effort to cherish and honor and nurture and love one another within the home? Whether or not the life we share in our homes enables us to become our best selves, our healthiest and most productive selves?

Really, in this complex world, does any of this even matter?
You bet it does. More than anything else.

How many remarkable lives like those of John and Charles Wesley are made possible because of a strong foundation of nurture and care and love built with deliberate intention within the home?

And how many potential lives that could have given so much to the world are curtailed and sidetracked and stunted because of a lack of love and nurture and care at home?

Jesus prays this high priestly prayer in the seventeenth chapter of John, and we are supposed to be eavesdropping – you might say – on a family discussion about the nurture and care and love which have existed in the household of God from all eternity!

“Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.”

In a sense, Jesus is saying, “Thank you for being such an awesome parent! Can I bring all of these friends of mine home with me? Because I know that they would really like it here too, and I’m sure that you’ll love them and they’ll love you, and it will be great!”

OK, so I'm paraphrasing a bit, but this is exactly the kind of feeling that I get when reading this prayer. And it's almost as if we are allowed a glimpse behind the curtain into the backstory of how Jesus was able to be so amazing. And it's because he came from an awesome home!

Perhaps we could even say, TWO awesome homes! His mother Mary certainly nurtured and cared, loved and guided him while growing up in Nazareth.

But John's Gospel is focused on the big picture, the cosmic view, on the eternal life of the Son of God in the bosom of the Father.

We have no words to say anything intelligent about the intimate life of God within Godself within eternity. There is nothing we can say...besides saying that it's fantastic!

The home life of God is so good and healthy and wonderful that God wants everybody to come home and join the family!

So does it matter what our home lives are like?
Absolutely! Nothing matters more.

Because life is all about relationships and what we put into them.

There is a common temptation to think that what REALLY matters is the working side of life, the productive side when we actually get things done and accomplished.

This is what many think. But the Holy Spirit teaches us differently. Thomas Merton once explained this distinction in clear and simple terms:

"The true path of [asceticism = following Christ] is a path of simplicity and obscurity, and there is no true Christian self-denial that does not begin first of all with a whole-hearted acceptance and fulfillment of the ordinary duties of one's state in life"
(Thomas Merton, *The Ascent to Truth*, p. 159).

A whole-hearted acceptance and fulfillment of the ordinary duties of one's state in life. In other words, following Christ starts at home!

Do you want to make the world a better place? Do you want to make a real difference in the world?

Forget about discovering the cure for cancer, or for resolving the Israeli and Palestinian conflict, or devising a plan to pay off our national debt!

Problems like these are real and they need to be addressed, but they mean little when compared to taking care of the actual people around you.

Do you want to make the world a better place? Then tell your mother that you love her. And back it up with actions of care and support and compassion.

Or, if you cannot tell your mother, then tell your sister or your aunt or your daughter or your niece.

Tell whatever woman in your life who is a mother that what she is doing is the most important work of all. Because her work of love and care and nurture, her work of building a home, makes real for us the amazing – and eternal – love of God.

And THAT is what makes the rest of life worth living. Amen.