

05.12.24 ~ Easter 7, Ascension, Mother's Day

"Loving God, Neighbor, and Family"

The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

Proverbs 22:6 (NIV)

⁶ Start children off on the way they should go,
and even when they are old, they will not turn from it.

Matthew 22:37-40 (NIV)

³⁷ Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." ³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment.

³⁹ And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' ⁴⁰ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

Leader: These Are Important Words from God!

All: Thanks be to God!

Acts 1:1-11 (NIV)

¹ In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach ² until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. ³ After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. ⁴ On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. ⁵ For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." ⁶ Then they gathered around him and asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" ⁷ He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

⁹ After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. ¹⁰ They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. ¹¹ "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."

Leader: These Words Demonstrate God's Love for us!

All: Thanks be to God!

Please pray with me:

Nurturing God, we thank you for the beautiful gifts you bestow on our mothers, grandmothers, stepmothers, great grandmothers, aunts, and caring women. They have influenced us in our families and in the church setting. They give so much physically, emotionally, and spiritually to others; please refresh and fulfill them as we recognize their important stewardship of wisdom and care. Help us to respect and applaud their love and commitment as they lean upon you daily. As you cared

for and taught the early disciples and later apostles, we ask you to continue caring for us. We still rejoice at the resurrection and you're your spirit through these scriptures; may your voice be heard through this messenger. Amen.

Happy Mother's Day! For some, today is joyous and fulfilling, being recognized for your role as life-giver, nurturer, provider, teacher, nurse, caregiver, wife, mom, stepmom, aunt, grandmother, great grandmother, sister, niece, daughter, granddaughter, etc. For others, this is a hard day: one where the profound absence of our mothers or of children to care for can bring on sadness and grief. Some in this category create special traditions like cooking their mom's favorite food, gardening, going to the cemetery, or looking at old photos to honor the mothers no longer with them. We are with you today no matter your way of honoring Mother's Day.

It is also Ascension Sunday, the Sunday after Jesus ascended to heaven to be back with his Father, God. Yes, it is tricky to tie these two together, so you'll have to listen carefully. The meaning may be between the lines or between you and Jesus, as you interpret your daily life and how you prepare to meet Jesus upon his return one day.

Firstly, love is a verb, not just a noun. When I first heard that said, I thought of my own mother's sacrificial loving acts to make our homes comfortable, caring, lovely, and generous. Her love was not just through her cooking and cleaning, yet that is how she acted on her love, but also through her time spent with us in conversation, prayer, play, teaching, and music. Today's proverb is often used to justify children's programs in the church, and I will say that it worked for me. My parents did raise me in a Godly home; yes, we had our troubles, but it paid off. The King James

version we all grew up with is this: “⁶Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it (Prov 22:6 ^{KJV}).” The Hebrew word in this passage “*hanak*” means to dedicate and train. It also means a narrowing or setting aside **from** evil and **toward** Godliness. A similar word means setting aside for divine service, much like Hannah’s dedication of Samuel to the Lord’s service. Preparing the child for adulthood is another definition, and isn’t that what parents do? The question remains, how do we prepare children for a life serving God?

In the Matthew passage, the Pharisees tried to trick Jesus. They asked which was the greatest commandment in the Law. His reply became a new commandment: to love God with all one’s heart, soul, and mind; and the second is to love one’s neighbor as oneself. These were unique and unexpected answers. Loving oneself did not mean self-centered love; survival in that day meant having enough love for oneself to care for yourself and one’s family. It meant having a high regard and self-respect to do one’s work for the community. All his disciples (including us) received these commandments to love one another, yet on this special day celebrating mothers, it is our mothers, parents, and all nurturing persons who demonstrate this agape need-meeting love so clearly. And we thank you for your example! Just last week, we celebrated nurses and teachers who have the same loving qualities and spiritual gifts to care for and teach others.

Mothers and mother figures are uniquely gifted to carry out these two commandments to love God first and love neighbor. I do realize not all mothers are suited to fulfill these tasks, and that is why we have social systems like foster homes or adoption set up to supplement those unable

to carry them out. Mother's Day is not always a happy day for some families, but even so, my suggestion in this message is that a home where the mom or mother figure does put God first and other's needs above her own, following these two commands, is a fine example of Christ's instruction to her children and extended family. The new commandments are the best life lessons a mother or mother-figure can give her children or share with the world. One scholar calls it a "double commandment of love," that restates Christ's whole teaching ministry in just two sentences!

To love others is not always easy, but it is the kind of agape love of our neighbors, including our enemies, which is most like God's own needs-meeting love. How challenging yet excellent it is to teach our children this kind of love. Think back to some Godly advice your own mother once gave you about loving or respecting someone who bullied you on the playground or hurt you in some way. It is hard to turn the other cheek, but we are taught and called to forgive. Mothers share the wisdom of God with their families, even the difficult relatives we sometimes invite to big family dinners or reunions! The matriarch usually holds the family together, especially if she built her life around these two new commandments. How are we doing in this area?

Mothers experience the awesome circle of life as we celebrated Christ's birth in December, his brutal, sacrificial death and unexpected, foretold resurrection in March, and now his Ascension earlier this week. We look forward to Pentecost next Sunday! The many appearances of Jesus reassured his disciples that he was alive and would be with God soon. In our Acts passage, they witness him ascend to be with his Father in heaven (this is where we get the limiting idea of "heaven is only up

there” but that is a different sermon). His ascension is another celebration, so perhaps today is a good day for it. It points us to the connection with God so deep within us believers, especially mothers. Their special gifts of mothering are not unlike Christ’s lessons while he was here on earth: to serve others. He washed the dirty feet of the disciples and served a final meal to explain the new covenant that would be given by his body and blood. He taught important life lessons like the Good Samaritan parable; he healed and cared for the marginalized, the lame, the mentally ill, and the poor. These gifts of service are not just for your families, but for all humankind in your presence or life circles. The Food Mission is an excellent example of ways to serve the kingdom beyond ourselves; some of these mothers must choose between rent, medicine, and food. We can be motherly toward them! The angels told the disciples, and I say to you, “Don’t look into the clouds for Jesus’ return!” Rather, first, look within yourselves for Jesus’ return to our hearts through compassion for his other children and our world. Happy International Mother’s Day. Amen. ||

Let us pray. Dear Lord, we thank you today for our mothers and mother-figures and for the divine gifts you provide them. We thank you for sending Jesus into our midst to experience your goodness and mercy. Be with mothers the world over to guide their steps and help them share their nurturing wisdom and giftedness. Encourage them where needed; hold them steadfast so they know your deep love. Nurture them too! Embolden them to share their faith with rebellious children and to love you first and their neighbors, whoever they may be. We pray in Jesus’ name, **Amen.**