

MOTHER'S LOVE LIKE GOD

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 66:12-14; 11 Cor. 1:3-4, RSV

When most people lived on farms, having a baby was the soundest economic event in a person's life. Each child was worth thousands of dollars to his parents. He worked part-time most of the year and in the summer he worked full-time, simply for room and board. In many ways, even though this doesn't give it the most glorious ring possible, parents had children for some very selfish reasons. Economics is a strong force with respect to our making decisions.

Today, of course, it is just the opposite. The most recent estimates indicate that any child you have will cost you between \$50,000 and \$75,000 before they are grown and beyond your responsibility. That kind of economic shift with respect to children has changed the picture considerably. It is no longer profitable to be a parent; it is expensive. Because of this we find people thinking a lot more carefully about having children. Most people now see the choice of having a child as essentially a moral choice. One is making decisions about not only one's self but about the child, whether you can or cannot care adequately for that child, whether or not emotionally, psychologically, and perhaps even physically, it would be better for both parents and child if that child did not exist. The increasing statistics on child abuse are a kind of silent witness to the fact that more and more children are unwanted. Abortion is on the increase for a number of reasons, one of which is that abortion is, if other methods fail, an effective means of contraception. When you do not want to have a child and science deserts you and a child is conceived anyway, couples are resorting to this method. What has happened is that having children is now seen as one of the quickest ways to a psychological jail. A couple does not always feel grateful or particularly blessed when a child is born to them. In fact, they sometimes see it as a curse.

Some years ago my wife and I discovered a book, *Liberated Parents Liberated Children*. The title intrigued me because it was a kind of flip testimony to what has happened to us as parents and as children. Even Paul had some problems which are reflected in his epistles: "Children provoke not your fathers to wrath;" and he told fathers to be careful how you treat your children. There was tension and conflict. Both parents and children felt locked into relationships (and still do) which they wished they did not have to endure.

If you talk to parents who have had their first babies, many of them will tell you that the shock to their life-style is something they still haven't gotten over. No nights out, free weekends gone, no freedom from worrying about someone else—all their freedom seems to be gone. The psychological experience is anything but an experience of liberation, at least initially.

This very interesting book is written by two women who attended a series of sessions by Haim Ginott about raising children, and this experience changed their lives. In my reading of the book, it helped change my life and my thinking as well. Every parent, every parent-to-be, needs to read this book and others to understand what it means to be a parent, to raise children and to deal with them as human beings. [The authors write that],

In an early session, Ginott asked the group, "What is our major goal as parents?" He sensed that there was some confusion. Someone ventured, "to improve parent-child relationships." Another said, "to find better ways of communicating with our children." Another woman glibly said, "to produce children who are, among other

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things, brilliant, polite, charming, neat, and well-adjusted, of course.”

Dr. Ginott looked solemn. It was obvious that this last comment had not amused him. He leaned forward and said,

“This is how I see it. It seems to me that our large goal is to find the ways to help our children become humane and strong.

“For what does it profit us if we have a neat, polite, charming youngster who could watch people suffer and not be moved to take action?

“What have we accomplished if we have reared a child who is brilliant—at the top of his class—but who uses his intellect to manipulate others?

“And do we really want children so well-adjusted that they adjust to an unjust situation? The Germans adjusted only too well to the orders of the Nazis to exterminate millions of their fellow men.

“Understand me: I’m not opposed to a child being polite or neat or learned. The crucial question for me is: What methods have been used to accomplish these ends? If the methods used are insults, attacks, and threats, then we can be very sure that we have also taught this child to insult, to attack, to threaten, and to comply when threatened.

“If, on the other hand, we use methods that are humane, then we’ve taught something much more important than a series of isolated virtues. We’ve shown the child how to be a person—*a mensch*, a human being who can conduct his life with strength and dignity.”

From across the room Helen’s eyes caught mine. There it was, that elusive idea that had so moved us at that first meeting had finally been identified. It was the concept of a process for humanizing—a concept that told us that every act of relating to a child had meaning, counted for something, became part of the fabric of the person he was to become. I could begin to see that when we said to a child, “The milk spilled” and handed him a sponge, we were doing more than using a clever technique for handling a minor mishap. On a much deeper level we were saying, “I see you as a person who is capable of helping himself. We were telling him:

“In time of trouble we don’t blame.”

“In time of trouble we focus on solutions.”

“In time of trouble we lend each other a helping hand.”

All at once it became sharply clear to me that if the very process one uses with a child determines the kind of human being he becomes, then I could never again feel the same about my job as a parent. True, the daily irritations would still be there, but I saw them now as opportunities to forge our children's character, opportunities to affirm the values I believed in.

The woman who had given the glib answer earlier spoke again, "I didn't realize I was doing such important work."

Dr. Ginott smiled, "It all depends upon how you look at it. Let me tell you a story:

"Three laborers were approached by a villager. 'What are you doing?' he asked them.

"The first worker said, 'I'm earning my living.'

"The second one said, 'I'm laying bricks.'

"The third one answered, 'I'm building a cathedral.'"

Silence. The woman nodded soberly.

I thought, we too are laborers. Our work is raising children. Our bricks—our moment-by-moment responses. Our cathedral—the realization of our children's full humanity.

We must add an element of mystery to all of this. That mystery is that no one knows what difference a child can make in the world for good or evil. We can't even know what difference we make. There is no way for me to go back to 1938 and not be born and watch what happens to all the people whose lives I have touched and see the consequences of my not ever having existed.

But there is a movie [eds. *It's a Wonderful Life*] which portrays the story of a person who had gotten into financial difficulty and tried to commit suicide. His life had been a life of dreams deferred for other people. In order to allow his brother to go to college, he had to sacrifice his own ambitions to go to school and do what he wanted. In order to rescue some people who were in trouble, he postponed his own plans for future education in another setting and situation. But the whole story was one of a man who sacrificed his life for other people and never got the chance to do what he wanted. When his company lost some critical money, a foreclosure was coming and it looked like all of the people who had depended on this savings and loan institution were now going to find their savings lost, he decided to commit suicide. But an angel rescued him from the freezing water.

As the angel (the man in the story doesn't realize it is an angel) is trying to get him to think otherwise, he keeps saying, "I wish I had never been born." In an attempt to communicate and break through this man's hard crust, the angel decides to grant his wish. He goes back to the very beginning and sees what the world would have been without the mystique of his own existence.

The difference, even though it is theater, is startling. He is shown the difference it makes to his mother

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who develops a mental illness because she does not have the kind of emotional support which she needs when his father dies at an early age. He is shown the difference it makes to his brother who becomes a drunkard because there was no one to put him through college and help him realize his own ambitions. He is shown the difference to a woman who needed money to support her child when her husband ran off and nobody would touch that situation, but he gave the needed money out of his savings and loan association and believed in her. But now that he doesn't exist, there was no savings and loan association to help her, so she became a prostitute to support herself and her son. The town which he had helped to shape because of his example and because he had given people a chance to own their own homes and because he had been aggressive in civic affairs., had become nothing but a speak-easy with saloons and trashy places of business. The revelation to this man of what a difference he personally had made to so many different people obliterated all thoughts of suicide. It was a powerful story, and in the words of one famous philosopher (Heidigger): To exist means to make a difference.

We are so tightly woven together in the fabric of human existence that it is impossible to tell what happens when one piece unravels and is missing. I want to say I don't like "Mother's Day" and "Father's Day" as if things happen separately—let's have "Parent's Day." In terms of parenting and especially of mothering, there is the mystical quality to human existence that we must respect, almost reverence. Our task as adults who are raising baby persons is to build cathedrals.

Many cathedrals were built in the Bible And I find it a little disappointing that we don't know more about some of the parents, particularly the mothers, behind some of the great Biblical characters. What kind of mother did Paul have? You find it almost more interesting to know the parents of people that impress you than perhaps to know the people themselves. Some of the people in the Bible like Amos and Micah were great cathedrals, but we do know something about the mothers of the two greatest in the Bible: Moses and Jesus.

There are many similarities in their stories and in the stories of their mothers. They both lived at a time when the lives of their sons were threatened by their rulers; both found ways to preserve their lives. They both trained their sons themselves in hidden defiance of the conventional education of the day to prepare them for what they sensed was some great mission God had given them. Both believed that their children were special and that in some sense they were going to be deliverers of God's people.

Jochebed and Amram parented a child, not yet named. They wanted their child to live to enjoy what they believed would be the soon deliverance of Israel. For three months, they concealed this child in obviously cunning and brilliant ways so the soldiers of Pharaoh could not find him.

When the child became three months old and hiding him at home became impossible, the mother put the baby in the Nile River where the princess of Egypt bathed. Miriam, the baby's sister, was watching the basket holding the baby. When the princess opened the basket, she recognized immediately what had happened (there was no mistaking a male Hebrew child). With compassion and tenderness that perhaps only a woman could have manifested in such a situation, she took the child and adopted him as her own.

Seeing a golden opportunity, Miriam ran to the princess and asked if she needed a Hebrew wet nurse,

which, of course, she did. So Jochebed was paid wages to nurse and then to raise her own son! She was very careful, we are told, about how she raised him because she knew she would only have him for a short time and then he would have to go to the schools of the Pharaoh to be trained as a royal person in militarism, philosophy, art and statesmanship. Moses was one of the best-educated men of his day, not only after he went to live in the palace but even before he got there. Jochebed taught him to reverence God, not to worship idols. Ellen White tells us in *Patriarchs and Prophets* that Moses never once (even though it became a very difficult problem for him) bowed down and worshiped an idol. On page 244 of this book, a very interesting comment is made about Jochebed and her impact on Moses,

How far reaching in its results was the influence of that one Hebrew woman, and she an exile and a slave! The whole future life of Moses, the great mission which he fulfilled as the leader of Israel, testifies to the importance of the work of the Christian mother. There is no other work that can equal this. To a very great extent the mother holds in her own hands the destiny of her children. [This is true of fathers also but Mrs. White is addressing this particular woman at this point.] Especially during the early years the responsibility rests upon her of forming the character of her children. Parents should direct the instruction and training of their children while very young, to the end that they may be Christians. They are placed in our care to be trained, not as heirs to the throne of an earthly empire, but as kings to God to reign through unending ages. Let every mother feel that her moments are priceless.

Mary, although just a teenager, taught Jesus at home. He never went to the schools of the rabbis. What kind of mother did Mary have? What kind of mother did Jochebed have? Like most Hebrews, I am sure that Mary's mother hoped for a son. Instead she got a daughter. In the opinion of some rabbis, this was a curse from God, but what a daughter. She kept Jesus' life quiet, simple, free from artificiality. He had a natural upbringing not any different from most children who have good, conscientious parents.

Yet, like Jochebed, she had to be willing, when He was 12, to recognize He was an individual and now she had to give Him up to perform the mission that God had destined for Him. Jesus in the temple at 12, when his parents had lost track of Him for two or three days, symbolically made His break. He was now basically someone whose destiny and mission in life was clear, and what His parents had done for Him was finished. There are repeated instances in Jesus' ministry where Mary acted the part of a wise mother. She made a suggestion but she pulled back when she saw that her Son was going in a different direction. He had to live out His life the way God had set it before Him.

What if Mary had been a different kind of woman, a different kind of mother? What if Jochebed had been different? We can't know what might have happened but we do know this: Their contribution to the history of this planet and to the church is inestimable. Jochebed and Mary. Two great mothers in Israel who built the greatest cathedrals and temples God has ever dwelled in.