

“Faith and Motherhood”

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5/9/2010

I have frequently heard that one way to determine how well our world will do is to look at how well mothers are doing. Without a doubt mother's are part of our human backbone – for the human family to do well it is essential that we have mothers that are strong enough to have the wellbeing of children in their hearts, minds and spirits.

Before I go further let me also say that fathers are no less important. I feel compelled to say this up front because it is often the case that some of us may feel slighted when we are not a member of the group that is being lifted up. It isn't my intention to diminish anyone else's vital role in the wellbeing of the world and children as I speak of the importance of mothers. I hope all of us who are not mothers will be glad to celebrate the place of mothers today knowing we are all part of the fabric that creates life's beauty and purpose.

Today however is an opportunity to focus a bit on motherhood and how well mothers are fairing.

Let me say what gets focused on in the media is not a very good representation of motherhood in the US.

Most recently we have heard the story of the woman who left her one year old daughter and ran off with a boyfriend to Florida. And we heard the story of the woman who adopted the little boy from Russia but ended up sticking him on a plane by himself and shipping him back to his homeland. And not so long ago the octo-mom was in the news and the family that became a reality TV show until the parents divorced. There are a number of sensationalized and some tragic stories of mothers in the news, but I would caution that these are not good lenses through which to draw conclusions about motherhood in our time.

Instead of looking to the media as our primary source for drawing some conclusions, let us look closer to home. What do you see in the lives of women you know and how are mother doing?

I have some observations that I would like to share and to a large extent they make me hopeful about our future. One of my most regular points of contact with mothers who have young children is our once a month family nights. A couple of years ago a group of families started meeting for several reasons – to nurture faith within their families; to get to know each other’s families, children and parents; to learn from each other helpful parenting tips and recognize common experiences; and finally to become a community for and with each other, essentially to become friends.

The more I am with these families the more they inspire me. The mothers who come are single moms, moms who are blending families, moms that have professional lives, moms that are managing significant illnesses and moms that just plain and simply love their children. Their children have lots of energy. Some are a bit quiet and others are really out there.

When I watch these moms in action I can see that they are trying to help their kids eat healthy, supper has to consist of more than just cookies; they are trying to teach their kids about treating others, children and adults, with care and respect; they are trying to learn who their kids are and to let them be themselves – no cookie cutter approach to molding these young lives; and these moms and fathers listen for the emotional and spiritual dimensions of their kids’.

There is a lot to being a mom, especially in our day. The demands of home, family and the community are remarkable. I remember one Sunday morning when I stopped to talk to one of the mom’s when she was coming into church – she and her family were sponsoring another family as they joined the church, she was teaching Sunday School that morning and I think she was having a birthday party for one of the kids right after church. I gulped when she told all she had going on in the next few hours and I asked her how she would manage it all. She smiled and said calmly, “one thing at a time.”

When I listen to these moms and I watch all that they invest in the lives of their children I am greatly encouraged about our world. It’s not that the moms are never frazzled or frustrated, and it isn’t that these moms are trying to do everything by themselves, in fact just the opposite is true and that is another reason for hope.

I think I see in these moms a wonderful balance between being delighted to be a parent and being deeply realistic about what it all entails. I see these moms look at their kids with the eyes of love and in the next moment instruct their kids about where to put their dirty dishes. The heart of motherhood is in the ability to hold these two together. Parenting involves loving our children with all we have so that they can express their gifts and be equipped for life.

To be this kind of a parent I believe moms need to nurture these same things in their own lives. In order to do a joyful and healthy job of taking care of others, moms need to do a joyful and healthy job of taking care of themselves. In the midst of all the giving there needs to be time for receiving, time for oneself and/or with other adults.

At our last Wednesday night family group I asked the parents about what we should do next fall. We talked about some topics to focus on and then it came up that they wanted to have more time to just talk with each other when the kids weren't present. Dinner and an opening time as families was good enough, we didn't have to have a closing time together too. They said we just need a bit more time to be parents together.

The parents in the group are very dedicated to their kids, and they interact with them a lot, but now they were claiming the time they needed without the kids being present, and I think it is very healthy.

Howard Thurman wrote some masterful words about what is to give direction to our lives. Thurman was a Quaker and as you probably know, Quakers practice listening as one of their central spiritual disciplines. From all his time trying to listen for God's voice Thurman wrote: "Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and then go do that. Because what the world needs are people who have come alive."

Thurman recognized that there is an intersection between what makes us come alive and what the world needs. I believe this is true about mothers and what their children need from them, what they need from you.

One of the greatest gifts mothers can give their children is to be fully alive and to be fully alive you need to nurture your own lives. This will take different forms for

different moms, but being attentive to one's own spirit is a necessity if you are to offer your children what is best for them. Children need to see their moms laugh, they need to see their moms have friends, they need to see what their moms care deeply about, they need to see their moms take care of their own physical well being.

Flora Wuellner who teaches about stress and anxiety and how people of faith can let go of anxiety offers some helpful instruction, she writes: "Each day let us encourage on another to take some intentional time even for a few minutes, just to rest in God's closeness, without any intense agenda. This fills our reservoirs of body and spirit. Some might prefer to sit or lie down in silence, or to listen to some music. Some prefer a walk, or to garden, or to paint. The important thing is just to soak in God's nurturing nearness."

Coming alive requires time to feel unburdened, time to feel some freedom, time to feel held. Mothers often provide these fits to others, but God knows you need them too.

On this mother's day morning there is much to be hopeful about regarding the wellbeing of mothers just beginning this vital role. And for mothers of all ages – grandmothers and all women who offer the gifts of nurture and direction to children who may be niece, nephews, children of friends, church members or children around the world – we encourage you to take time for yourself, to be held by God so that you might come to know your places of greatest vitality. To be fully alive is what we hope for you and is what the world needs most.