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The Message: Dorcas' Fashion Show

Hear this prayer directed to a mother:

Sweet nurse, sweet mother,
who are the children you are in labour with, and nurse,
but those whom by teaching the faith of Christ
you bear and instruct?

And later, to another mother:

Are you not the mother who, like a hen,
gathers her chickens under her wings?
Truly, you are a mother;
for both they who are in labour
and they who are brought forth
are accepted by you.

These prayers were written in the year 1070, by Anselm, archbishop of Canterbury. That in itself is remarkable, for this monk, abbot, archbishop, philosopher, theologian would not be the first person you would think of as being particularly conversant in the characteristics of motherhood.

Here we have St. Anselm in the early middle ages, lifting up characteristics of motherhood. But more surprising is that these prayers are directed at two specific individuals. The first is St. Paul and the second is Christ himself.

So yes, this prayer can a bit startling to modern ears, but it's totally Biblical: the scriptural basis for the idea of Paul as a mother comes from the apostle's own words (1 Thessalonians 2:7; Galatians 4:18-19), while the metaphor of Christ as mother to a brood of chicks comes from Matthew (23:37).

Anselm prays,
Then you, Lord, are a mother
and you, Paul, are a mother too...

And you, my soul, dead in yourself,
run under the wings of Jesus your mother
and lament your griefs under his feathers.
Ask that your wounds may be healed
and that, comforted, you may live again.

Christ, my mother,
you gather your chickens under your wings;
... by your gentleness the badly frightened are comforted,
by your sweet smell the despairing are revived,
your warmth gives life to the dead,
your touch justifies sinners.

When we lift up Christian virtues in those we love, we cheat ourselves if we limit those virtues to motherhood or fatherhood.

Anselm writes, "You are ... mothers by your affection, mothers by your kindness, mothers by your mercy."

So when we speak of the characteristics of motherhood -- they are holy and they are universal - - not just applied to biological mothers.

But Anselm wouldn't know the nitty gritty of being a mother.

"What I cannot figure out," says a young mom, "is why or how this is supposed to be enjoyable. It makes no sense that you spend your life trying to get them to brush their teeth, pick up their clothes, do their homework, practice, get out of bed and stop fighting when this is simply not what they want to do."

Even the easiest of children causes Mom to worry on the first day of school and the first day of a new job.

We sacrifice for those we love, and we forgive those we love.

I was reminded recently of a time when I was doing on call chaplaincy the week after Christmas. I got a call from one of those no frills burial companies. Mrs. X had died of a heart attack. The family was asked if they wanted prayers but declined. Hours later they changed their minds. To the request to me was to go and say prayers over her body.

Where was she? In the morgue.

How would I get into the morgue? I met a security guard who was instructed to open the morgue. He was not happy. In fact, I suspect he was very superstitious and figured this was one place he didn't want to be. So he took me down into the bowels of the old Oakville Hospital, unlocked the door and literally pushed me in and slammed and locked the door. I pushed down the question that rose to my mind: "was the door locked from the inside too?" and looked around.

It wasn't like tv with all those neat metal drawers. It was cold. The room was full of guernies with bodies covered by sheets. How was I going to figure out which one was mine to pray over? I discovered gender wasn't going to help. All women. Mine was fifty-two. They all looked about that age.

Ah, toe tags! By now I was feeling a bit superstitious too, or maybe it was queasy. Eventually I found the right toe. And I prayed. I prayed for this mom, and all the other moms there, who perhaps had worked so hard over the past few days to make Christmas for their families before they succumbed from exhaustion.

After five years of doing on call the week after Christmas, I told the chaplain, "no more. You have to move me to another week." I had attended the death of a mom every year for five years right after Christmas.

Today we have the story of Tabitha/Dorcas in our lectionary readings today, a woman who spent her life giving to others until she died..

It isn't clear that Dorcas was a mother. What we do know is that, unlike many unnamed women of the Bible, she has two names.

Her Aramaic name is Tabitha: Aramaic -- the language scholars believe Jesus spoke -- his mother tongue.

Tabitha means gazelle or graceful.

Dorcas, the Greek translation is also included. There is a small gazelle that is called the dorcas gazelle.

For our Dorcas, we can say that she was graceful, that is, 'full of grace.'

What else do we know about her?

- Dorcas is the only one in the disciple to be referred to as 'mathetria' a female disciple.
- She was devoted to good works and acts of charity.
- She was likely a prominent woman of means since she was able to help those in need
- she became ill and died.
- Her friends were all widows, so she may have been a widow too.
- They prepared her body and laid her in an upper room.
- She was important enough that the disciples went to find Peter in another town.
- When Peter arrived he found all the widows crying.
- They showed him tunics and other clothing that she had made them.
- She was raised to new life.
- Many believed because of her.

Peter raises Dorcas from the death of exhaustion after expending all her time and resources for the benefit of others at the expense of her own well-being.

The story of Dorcas is unique. Here we have:

- A woman
- So much detail about who she is and what she does
- A whole community gathered around her who cared for her and acted out that care in specific ways --
 - crying,
 - going for help,
 - washing her body and
 - laying her in an upper room, the safest place in the house.

And then Peter comes. And the widows begin telling stories. Isn't that what we do? We tell stories of our loved ones when they are gone. We remember together. And apparently remembering Dorcas meant remembering her craft. They showed him the tunics and other clothing that they were wearing.

It seems a wonderful tribute to Dorcas - a living fashion show. The work of her hands walking around while stories are told of her love and compassion. It was the fashion show of her life. Peter raises her to new life. I don't see this as a reward for wearing herself out, but rather as a recognition of how much she loved and was loved by her community and by God. The community of women and men who acted is met by God's handiwork.

This story is told in the book called The Acts of the Apostles, but this is really a story about God's Acts, God's life giving love and what happens when we model that love, hard as it is.

So bring on the flowers and cards, chocolates and restaurant meals; share with others the stories of their acts of kindness. They are signs of the love that mothers need as they give their all. But don't limit your love to only biological mothers.

Be a part of a living fashion show: lift up the grace-filled acts of others. Love all those who take care: nurses and neighbours, friends and strangers. Notice the gifts that others give; the sacrifices they make. These are the stories of God's love in human form. In expressing appreciation, you are breathing new life into the world.