

**Sermon Preached May 10, 2009**  
**Year B, Easter 5**  
**St. Paul's Episcopal Church**  
**North Andover, Massachusetts**  
**The Rev. Stephanie Chase Wilson**

In the name of God Almighty: Creator, Lover, and Keeper. Amen. (from Julian of Norwich).

Do you remember what it was like to be 13? Speaking for myself, it was an awkward age. Like many young teenagers, I was self-conscious. I remember one day going out shopping with my mother. We were putting on our boots when I noticed she was tucking her pant legs into her boots. I was mortified! “Mom!” I exclaimed, “That looks tacky! Take your pants out of your boots.” She reasonably explained why she wasn’t going to do that because it kept her pant legs dry. I started in again, “But you are going to embarrass me if you dress like that! I can’t be seen with you. You have to walk 5 feet behind me so no one knows you are my mother.” Like all reasonable mothers, she ignored my request and walked where she liked. This story says much more about my own insecurities than it does about my mother’s fashion sense.

Yet despite my obvious shortcoming, there were many times when my mother took care of me at some sacrifice to herself. And this didn't end with childhood. After giving birth to Emma I was seriously ill for a couple of weeks. My mother was working at the time, but as soon as she learned of my illness, she marched into her boss' office and announced she was taking an indefinite leave of absence. She then hopped on a plane to Baltimore and began caring for me and my family until I got well.

This is a great example of motherhood. Most mothers, most of the time, will do this sort of thing for their children. We are hardwired to love our children and do what is best for them, even at personal cost.

This past Friday was the feast day of Dame Julian of Norwich. She is a famous English mystic who lived in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. She was most definitely not a mother, but she had some interesting things to say about motherhood. Julian was a sort of hermit; she lived as an anchoress. This meant that a room was built for her on the side of a church and she was sealed inside of the room for the rest of her life. She took vows to remain in there and to say prayers for the community. There was a window so that food and essentials could be passed in and out. People could then also visit with her by talking through the window.

But primarily she engaged in contemplative prayer. She became a famous spiritual woman and advisor.

When she was about 30 years old she suffered a terrible illness and almost died. During this illness she had a series of intense visions about Jesus. After she became well again, she wrote these visions down and her interpretation of what they meant. Her powerful writings became a source of insight and comfort for generations of Christians.

One of the many striking things about her writings is some of her feminine imagery of God and of Christ in particular. She sees in Christ many of the best qualities of motherhood. For instance, Jesus sacrifices himself for us like a mother sacrifices herself for her children. Julian writes about Jesus saying,

“The Second Person of the Trinity is our mother in nature ... In him we are grounded and rooted, and he is our mother by mercy... by taking flesh. Thus our mother, Christ... works in us in various ways. For in our mother, Christ, we profit and increase, and in mercy he reforms and restores us, and by virtue of his passion, death, and resurrection joins us to our substance. This is how our

mother, Christ, works in mercy in all his beloved children who are submissive and obedient to him....”<sup>1</sup> Pretty unique stuff!

In trying to describe God’s abundant love, Julian can find no better image than that of motherhood. She writes, “To motherhood as properties belong natural love, wisdom and knowledge - and this is God.”<sup>2</sup> God and mothers share many of the same qualities.

She acknowledges that human mothers are not perfect as Christ, but the love of human mothers gives us some inkling of how unconditionally God loves us. In fact, she sees Holy Communion as one very important way of how Jesus’ love is similar, but even better than, that of a mother’s. She writes, “A mother can give her child milk to suck, but our precious mother, Jesus, can feed us with himself. He does so most courteously and most tenderly, with the Blessed Sacrament, which is the precious food of true life.”<sup>3</sup>

Julian writes of this great goodness and generosity of Jesus in the context of explaining sin. Unlike the church of her day, Julian did not see sin as the breaking of a law. Jesus’ crucifixion was not to make us pure before a

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.gloriana.nu/mother.htm>, 5/9/09

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

judgmental God. God is not angry with us because of our sin. Julian instead saw sin as a sickness and Jesus as the good mother who wants to heal her child. Just as you might run out to the store in the middle of the night to get your child Tylenol when he has the flu, so too Jesus will suffer death on the cross to heal our sins.

The 14<sup>th</sup> century was a time of the Black Death. The plague cropped up repeatedly during Julian's life. People suffered from it. People also suffered from poverty, ill health, and broken relationship just like they do at all times. They suffered from the sins of greed, pride, and gluttony and their effects on the community. Her room was located practically in the center of town, so while she was a sort of hermit, she was still intimately aware of the lives of the people in her community: their sufferings, sins, and trials.

Julian said the only way to deal with sin and suffering was to be united with Jesus, the loving mother. Not that our sufferings will go away, but that we will have the ability to bear them. And we will find joy in the midst of them. Julian spoke often that life is filled with both "woe and weal." These are old English words which mean, "distress" and "well-being." Our lives are filled with both. Julian writes, "we have in us, for the time of this life, a marvelous

mingling both of weal and woe: we have in us our Lord Jesus arisen, [and] we have in us the wretchedness and the mischief of Adam's falling, dying."<sup>4</sup> In other words, we are united with Christ in his death and suffering on the cross, but we are also united with Christ in his resurrection. Both are true at the same time. Woe and weal exist simultaneously.

“In the midst of suffering and sin, we are intimately united with Jesus who suffers the effects of sin. For Julian this means that one cannot speak of stages of spiritual progress or measure where one stands on the “ladder of perfection.” [We can't ever be perfect; nor should we expect to be] What we can know is that even in the depths of sin and suffering, we are deeply enfolded in the love of God.”<sup>5</sup>

This perfectly matches our readings today. 1 John notes that, “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.” [1 John 4:16] And the gospel of John says, “Abide in me as I abide in you. .... I am the vine, you are the branches.” [John 15:4-5]. When we unite ourselves to God, when we recognize that all we are and all we have is from God, then we will

---

<sup>4</sup> “Will everything really be OK?: the spirituality of Julian of Norwich,” *Commonweal*, Feb 27, 1998 by Frederick C. Bauerschmidt [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m1252/is\\_n4\\_125/ai\\_20492650/?tag=content:coll](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1252/is_n4_125/ai_20492650/?tag=content:coll), 5/9/09

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

know true love and peace. Sin and suffering cannot touch us. They will be there, certainly, but our union with Christ and each other through the one vine, makes us one community. Our community will experience the love of God and the love of each other and together will be part of the resurrection life which overcomes death and suffering.

Yesterday I was teaching the Communion Class to three young people of St. Paul's. We discussed that there are several things going on with communion, but one of them is that we get to love God and neighbor at the same time, and that in that, God loves us. There are other things going on, like grace and the Holy Spirit and strength and courage to be the Body of Christ in the world, but they are in addition to the love. Rose McKenna said, "it's sort of like mashed potatoes and gravy." What? We all looked at her quizzically. She said, "The love of God and neighbor in communion is like the mashed potatoes, which is the best part, and everything else is like gravy." Out of the mouths of babes!

Abiding in God means loving God and neighbor; and where God, the loving mother, cares for and loves you. You are healed from sin, and find joy and wholeness in the midst of the distress of life. Woe and weal. Sickness and

healing. Sin and Resurrection. God loves us unconditionally like a mother. May all our mothers be blessed this day. Amen.