

MANY MOTHERS
REV. DANA WORSNOP
ATKINSON MEMORIAL CHURCH
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Her First Calf – Wendell Berry

Her fate seizes her and brings her
down. She is heavy with it. It
wings her. The great weight
is heaved out of her. It eases.
She moves into what she has become,
sure in her fate now
as a fish free in the current.
She turns to the calf who has broken
out of the womb's water and its veil.
He breathes. She licks his wet hair.
He gathers his legs under him
and rises. He stands, and his legs
wobble. After the months
of his pursuit of her, now
they meet face to face.
From the beginnings of the world
His arrival and her welcome
have been prepared. They have always
known each other.

When I was a teacher, I would often talk about “my kids.” People who didn't know me well would sometimes ask, “How many kids do you have?” When I answered, “Thirty-two” their eyes would pop until they realized I must be a teacher, and I realized they thought I was a mother.

There are many ways to be a mother, and we are mothered to by many throughout our lives. We have many mothers, and it's a good thing we do. Motherhood is an institution loaded with so many expectations and idealizations. We talk of Mother Love as being unconditional and selfless. And there is something to this. Our mothers gave us life, bore us into the world. The bond between mother and child is strong. Yet because of that very strength, it is a complicated relationship. Because we are human, it never fully lives up to expectations and ideals.

Today I hope we can honor our mothers – all of them – reverently, gratefully, and honestly. Just as the holy has many names and faces, so too do the mothers in our lives. For while we have only one biological mother, any real definition of motherhood takes us far beyond the ability to give birth. I know children of lesbian couples who clearly have two very real mothers. And children who have been adopted have two mothers as well. Then I think of all the people – women and men – who have mothered me throughout my life. I think of the children I have mothered.

As humans, we have such a capacity to love one another. And the love we feel for children is perhaps the fiercest and tenderest. We are wired that way. I spent sweet time this week holding the newest member of this community, Eliot Orion Forrest who was born to Erika and Brandon Forrest just over a week ago. I held a tiny hand, tickled soft toes and felt the close weight and warmth of his body against mine. Babies trust us to hold them because there is nothing else they can do. There is an indescribable contentment in such moments, and such responsibility.

We are wired to love our babies.

We live in the age of mammals – an age that began some 65 million years ago when the time of the dinosaurs passed. One significant adaptation of mammals is the limbic brain. The emotional part of our brain which allows us to love. It is the adaptation that has helped mammals survive and thrive for these millions of years. Even as humans only arrived quite recently in this age, we have benefited from the millions of years of development that preceded our arrival.

High school biology concentrates on the physical differences between mammals and the reptiles from which we evolved. We are warm, not cold, blooded, have hair not scales, and we give birth to our babies rather than laying eggs. But these physical classifications overlook a major brain difference, according to *A General Theory of Love*, a book which explores our human capacities to love. I quote at some length. “As mammals split off from the reptilian line, a fresh neural structure blossomed within their skulls. This brand-new brain transformed not just the mechanics of reproduction but also the organismic orientation toward offspring. Detachment and disinterest mark the parental attitude of the typical reptile, while mammals can enter into subtle and elaborate interactions with their young.

“Mammals bear their young live; they nurse, defend, and rear them while they are immature. Mammals, in other words, *take care of their own*. Rearing and caretaking are so familiar to humans that we are apt to take them for granted, but these capacities were once novel – a revolution in social evolution.... Mammals form close-knit, mutually nurturant social groups – families – in which members spend time touching and caring for one another. Parents nourish and safeguard their young, and each other, from the hostile world outside their group. A mammal will risk and sometimes lose its life to protect a child or mate from attack.

“The limbic brain also permits mammals to sing to their children. Vocal communication between a mammal and offspring is universal.... And mammals can play with one another, an activity unique to animals containing limbic hardware.”

Now mammals also went on to develop a neo-cortex – a thinking brain which of course complicates things immeasurably. And humans, having the most developed limbic brain and neo-cortex, also have emotional and relational interactions which are all the more subtle, elaborate and complicated.

Our capacity to love and care for our children, our babies, is what has kept us going as a species. That we also do terrible things to one another does not detract from the power of this truth. That a mother cow can feel such strong love for her calf, does not detract from our capacity as humans to love. I find comfort in knowing this capacity is not limited to humans. I feel closer to the family created by the interdependent web of existence.

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If somehow we could hold onto this memory – that we have always known each other – perhaps then we would be less likely to do the terrible things of which we are capable. Perhaps this is why we honor and revere Mother Love, for it is pure and fierce and tender. It calls us to care for one another.

It is also why we need so many mothers throughout our lives. We are human and complicated and imperfect, and we need each other. For our lives come together and separate, touch each other and move on in ways that we can never fully understand or appreciate in the present.

My childhood friend, or perhaps I should say my childhood nemesis, Cathy Kellar, was born on a Mother’s Day, a fact she and her mother both loved to relate. Cathy, which is not her real name, lived just two doors down from me, and between us lived Cheryl, another girl our age, in the same grade at the same school. The three of us played together every day after

school and all summer long. We formed a classic childhood triangle. Cathy was an only child and she was spoiled, or at least that's how Cheryl and I explained her need to be at the center of everything we did. In our girlish fantasy games, Cathy *always* got Paul McCartney and Davey Jones. Cathy was strong willed and manipulative and she always got her way. It drove Cheryl and me crazy, but we never did figure out how to change the dynamic. This triangle provided much of the drama of my childhood.

But Cathy had a great mother. My own mother, for all her gifts to me, has never been especially maternal. My family has never been one for great displays of emotion. Cathy's mother was different. Mrs. Kellar was fun, full of life and feeling. She listened to us. I don't remember the content of any conversation, but I remember laughing a lot and the sense of warmth that pervaded her kitchen. She was kind to me. She recognized a child, not her own, in need of kindness and she gave it. And she made the best coleslaw on the planet. I don't think I ever really compared her to my mother. I think I was simply surprised that someone else's mother could be the way Mrs. Kellar was.

Mrs. Kellar died when we were in 6th grade. She was in the hospital for what seemed a very long time, and then she died. I remember someone saying it was her liver. I was devastated. I remember hearing my mother's end of the conversation when a neighbor called with the news. I was sobbing before she got off the phone. My parents wouldn't let me attend her funeral because I was so upset. I doubt my presence would have comforted Cathy much, but I think it would have made a difference to me. Mrs. Kellar was a second mother to me. She had qualities I didn't find in my own mother, and I loved her.

Cathy, Cheryl and I were already drifting into different crowds when Mrs. Kellar died. Cathy went on to be fairly wild through middle and high school. It wasn't until decades later that I realized that Mrs. Kellar was probably an alcoholic and had died of cirrhosis. It explained a lot – both Cathy's "spoiled" behavior as a child and her wildness as a teen. I can now look back with far greater understanding and compassion for my childhood nemesis. Yet I look back with no less love for Mrs. Kellar. She was kind to me, and I will never forget her.

So much of our journey in life is about accepting our own flaws and imperfections, and accepting the imperfections of family, friends and even strangers. Mother's Day can be difficult for many of us. There is much to honor in motherhood – the nurture, support and unconditional love. None of us would be here without our mothers, those who gave us birth and the other women (and yes men) who have mothered us throughout our lives. We humans literally cannot survive – as individuals or as a species – without mothering.

Yet there are so many cultural expectations centered on the ideal of motherhood and a mother's love. None of our mothers always lived up to that ideal, and some fell pretty far short. The expectations of noble and pure love from our mothers can make us feel even more hurt and betrayed when our mothers' prove to be less than perfect. Those cultural expectations can also make mothers feel inadequate long before their children get old enough to throw those inadequacies back at their faces. And when a mother's own life makes it all but impossible for her to even come close to that ideal, the pain for her children often will never go away.

Our relationships with our mothers are complicated, powerful and wonderful. I hope today that you will honor all the complications, the power and the wonder of that relationship.

On this Mothers' Day may we honor the mothers of this congregation in every shape, size and form, of every gender and sexual orientation. May we acknowledge the pain and hurt that can arise between mother and child. May we honor the imperfections and humanity of all mothers and of all children. May we feel ourselves connected not just to the human family but the family of all creation in acknowledging our great capacity to love.