

Experiencing God in our Relationships

Gen 2:15-25, Luke 15:13-24

Friends, there's two ways that we can celebrate Mother's Day.

One way is to take all that we might consider to be the ideals of Motherhood; like offering emotional support, keeping the house neat and organized, holding the family together, looking after the kids, being the cook and first aid responder, the financial planner and chauffeur and so on... and then we tell our Mom how well she manages to do all those things and that she still looks good while doing it all.

And that's nice – but it's always struck me as being somewhat of a sham which doesn't reflect of the reality of Motherhood very well.

So I've always preferred to celebrate Mother's Day from a more realistic point of view; which acknowledges that family life can be crazy, messed up and very un-perfect and that somehow in the midst of it all God can use Mothers to pass on

His grace and love to their families regardless of whether or not they have it all together.

And because I prefer a more realistic, less staged portrayal of life and family dynamics... I've always appreciated the comic strip "For Better or For Worse." Maybe you are familiar with it?

It's about the day to day life of the Patterson family; and the cartoonist Lynn Johnston always manages to find some humor in the ups and downs of marriage, parenting, and relationships.

And I think this particular picture accurately sums up the honesty with which she portrays and celebrates being a mother – no doubt drawn from her own life experience.

And Lynn Johnston is a good example to use - not only because she portrays an honest celebration of Mother's Day, but because when Lynn first became a mother, she also came to believe that God existed.

That's a good example of what the second topic in our Green Worship series is about: Experiencing God in our relationships.

I remember reading about this in a biography from one of her earlier publications where she candidly shared that at some point in her young adult years that she had come to conclusion that God didn't exist.

But then... a few years later, when her first child was born, somehow seeing that little baby – that miracle of life which had come into the world through her, made her believe that somehow there just had to be a God...

And I know she's not alone – many women have experienced God in some way as they have become mothers and brought a new life into this world.

Let me share with you some quotes that I found on the UCAN (Union of Catholic Asian News) Spirituality Website;

A Mormon woman described her birth experience in the following way: *The nurse had been so loud, like, "You can do it!"—cheering me on. And then right as she [the baby] was born, the nurse got quiet and the doctor got quiet and my husband got quiet. It felt honestly like a moment frozen, and the room was bright. It was one of those moments when the Spirit is there.*

A Guatemalan Catholic mother shared a similar experience. She stated, *"Giving birth I felt closer to God. I thank God for allowing me to have a baby. While the baby was in the womb, I realized how great God is"*

An Orthodox Jewish mother *"You feel God's presence most tangibly when you have gone through childbirth"*.

An Arabic Muslim woman expressed the sense that she was one with God during labor and birth: *"I felt like a miracle might happen—that there was something holy around me, protecting me, something beyond the ordinary, a feeling, a spirit about being part of God's creation of a child."*

A Chinese woman said “[Childbirth] really isn’t easy at all. Every mother experiences pain [in childbirth], but I do believe it is sacred”

Childbirth can be a very spiritual experience where women encounter a sense of God and this can have a profound effect on what they believe and how they live as mothers.

Maybe some of the mothers here this morning have had similar experiences as well?

And it’s not only mothers – when men become fathers they also can experience God in the miracle of new life that has come into the world and that has an effect on them as well.,

Often the birth of a child is the moment where an irresponsible young man suddenly becomes responsible and is willing to put his own needs aside to do whatever it takes to care and provide for his new child.

If you watched the series finale of the TV show “How I met your Mother” you will see this transformation take place in life of Barney Stinson – who is an incorrigible rascal and all around womanizer – when his womanizing finally catches up with him and he has a little girl.

And when Barney holds his child, he is instantly transformed from a “player” into a “protective father” and he no longer hits on young women at the bar but instructs them “*to go home put on something decent!*”

And personally, when I became a father – I was able to understand how God must feel towards me as my Heavenly Father, with the emotions I felt as a father for my child, and a whole new dimension of understanding my relationship with God opened up for me!

And how many times have we heard stories about how the relationship of a child with their mother and father has been significant factor in forming their understanding of who God is and what He is like...

People will say that they can understand God's unconditional love because they had a mother who always loved them, who was always there for them, even when they messed up.

In Isaiah 49:15-16 God says *"Can a mother forget the baby at her breast, and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands."*

People will say that they can understand God's provision and guidance because they had a father who made sure their family was taken care of, who stepped in when it was needed, who laid down the law in a firm but gentle manner.

And conversely, people will also say that when their parents have failed them, abused them, neglected or abandoned them it has negatively impacted their experience of God and has made it harder for them to believe in God, to trust God, to love God...

This is why the Apostle Paul says in 1 Tim 5:8 *"Anyone who does not provide for their relatives, and especially for their own household, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever."*

And most of us would probably say that we've experienced God in some way in a friendship, a mentoring relationship, or even in the random kindness of a stranger – when we've been comforted, encouraged, guided or helped or helped others...

As Jesus reminds us in Matt 25:40 *"Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."*

And all this is so friends – because as our focus on Green Spirituality suggests – we can experience and learn something about God from His Creation – and that also includes the relationships *which He has created* for us to have – for better or for worse.

But why can we experience God through these relationships?
And why can people who believe in false religions or have no religion... genuinely experience God in these relationships?
And why do we have to qualify relationships by adding the phrase “for better or for worse?”

Well friends this is where we bring in what we learned last week about using our minds, and thinking like a Christian – and applying the biblical storyline of Creation, Fall, Redemption, and New Creation.

And starting with Creation in Genesis 2:18, 2:22, and 1:28 we see that human relationships were originally God’s idea, and His creation, and His command.

Gen 2:18 - The LORD God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.”

Gen 2:22 - Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

Gen 1:28 – “God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number;”

So because God created relationships for us – we experience something of God as creator and who He is through them...

And because every human being who has ever existed has come from these relationships God has created – anyone can thus experience God in them and through them... regardless of their religion and whether it is true or not.

However while relationships, understood in the context of Green Spirituality can allow anyone to experience and come to know something of God as creator – which is why we call it “**general revelation**” in theological terms ...

They are not sufficient for revealing the reason behind the brokenness and pain that we also experience in them, nor can they reveal what the ultimate solution to that brokenness is.

(Side note: *it's what people put forward as the reason for and solution to this brokenness that distinguishes truth from false religion*)

We need to keep following the biblical storyline in order to discover that...

When we do... its revealed that brokenness and pain are a result of Adam and Eve's Sin - their disobedience of God's command regarding the tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil.

So in Gen 3:16 God lays out the relational consequences of Sin to Eve *"I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with painful labor you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you."*

And this is why we add that qualifier to our human relationships - "for better or for worse..."

When I do marriage preparation with young couples I always tell them: that a marriage relationship will eventually push you to the point where you recognize how truly self-centered you are, and that somehow you need to overcome that selfishness...

So friends, not only do we experience God in many different ways in and through our relationships, we also experience **our need for God** as Savior and Transformer in our relationships as well.

And the good news friends, is that even before God outlined the consequences which Sin would have on relationships – He had promised that Redemption would come... through relationships.

In Gen 3: 15 God says to the Serpent –Satan - who had deceived Eve and Adam; *"I will put enmity between you [Satan] and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel."*

Did you catch that double promise friends?

God promises that he will not allow a relationship to form between the Serpent and the Woman... He will put enmity – hostility, antagonism between them in place of the relationship which allowed Satan to deceive Eve.

God is like a parent removing the friend who is a bad influence away from their kid.

And – God promises that eventually one of Eve’s offspring – one of her children... or her children’s children is going to deliver a fatal blow to the Devil. *“He will crush your head”*

Redemption is going to come through relationships, through Motherhood, through childbearing...

Since God promised to use childbearing in this way, this is yet another reason why so many women, regardless of whether they know the truth, will often experience a sense of God in childbirth – as a reflection, an echo of that promise of

redemption given all those years ago – and finally fulfilled in the birth of Jesus Christ.

And so we experience God in our relationships friends – in the better and the worse...

When things are good it can help us to believe God exists, and to better understand His care, and how He views us and loves us – and when things are worse because of the consequences and symptoms of the Fall - it pushes us to seek a solution and turn to God for help.

And this is why Jesus Christ told the story about the prodigal son, which we read part of this morning.

If you are familiar with the story you’ll know that the son insulted his father by demanding that he receive his share of the inheritance before his father had passed away.

And then the son left the family – and went off to live on his own.

And he wasted all of his father's hard earned money by partying with call girls - until the money ran out and he had nothing left. He hit rock bottom.

And then as we read this morning He comes to his senses and decides to see if he can go home and he receives a totally unexpected and undeserved welcome and celebration party upon his arrival.

And friends this story works because any father, any mother, any child can relate to what's going on in this story.

Parents have either been there with a child who has treated them badly, or they can imagine how painful it would be to have a child who would treat them this way.

And children can resonate with that desire to want to get away from the "house-rules" which seem to be so restrictive and can cramp their style... or they will be shocked that a child would treat their parent who loves them so badly...

So we can all enter into this story because of our own experiences in relationships - and it opens up a whole new way of understanding of God's relationship with us.

We might go from just believing that God exists to understanding that in reality we are like children who would rather take God's good gifts and run off and ignore him...

We might go from thinking that God is angry and wants nothing to do with us to understanding that the reality is that God is like a parent who never stops looking for their child to come home...

We might go from thinking that we're better off without God and his rules in our lives to realizing that without God and his rules in our lives we're going to hit rock bottom - and that we need God...

And we can understand this and experience this all because of God's good gift of relationships and all that goes on in them.

They have in many ways prepared us to understand the reality of our relationship with God and what is needed for us to be reconciled and restored in our relationship with God.

They help us to go from just experiencing a sense of God, or just believing that He exist to knowing Him fully as our Creator, Redeemer and Transformer...

And friends this is why it's good to celebrate relationships, to celebrate Mother's Day – in an honest and realistic way – because it reflects the story of scripture, and it shows the reality of how everything is affected by the story of scripture – even when just start by looking at what we can experience about God from His creation.

So friends – as we celebrate our Mothers... and our relationships with them today – let's stay open and alert for what we can experience and learn about our relationship with God... and how we can grow in our relationship with Him as we honor our relationships with our mothers. Amen.