

## Easter 6

Readings: Acts 10: 44 – 48  
Psalm 98  
1 John 5: 1 – 6  
John 15: 9 – 17

Today is Mothers Day and I'd like to begin by saying "Happy Mothers Day" to all mothers and women who have taken on a mothering or parenting role to others. Mothers and women in general have been, and still are, very important in the life of the church. I've heard it said in the church, and perhaps it is applicable across most churches, that mothers or women are the backbone of the church. Everything hinges on their strength or ability to hold the rest of the body together. Without them, not much may get done in the church. Would the men agree?

I watched an animated movie called "Mars needs moms." It's about a boy named Milo who tries to rescue his mother from a matriarchal society on the planet Mars. When Martian babies are born, only females are kept and raised by robots or "nannybots" while the males are despatched to live outside the city. Nannybots are programmed using the memories and skills of mothers from earth who were good at disciplining and controlling their children. Milo's mother was seen

to be the best candidate for the Martians. The leaders of the Martians wanted an orderly and controllable society. But in rescuing his mother, the Martians eventually got to know and finally experience something else about Milo and his mother – that Milo loved his mum, the mum loved Milo, and that a family or society was not just about order and discipline; they were also about being and living together in love.

Mothers are important in the church, and so too are fathers and children. Their their roles imply that family relations in the church are also important. The church, after all, is a family in Christ. We are brothers and sisters in Christ, and we are also mothers and fathers in Christ who play our part in living out our faith in the household of God. And just as the Martians had come to understand that life was just not about order and discipline through loveless and mechanical responses from nannybots, we in the church know that our relations with others are not always about thoughtless and careless responses from one another. In fact, we believe it should be the opposite. We know that human relations are complex and not always straightforward or easy. But we also hold that they are grounded in love nonetheless – grounded in the love of God.

Our reading from 1 John chapter 5, as seen in our call to worship, talks about relations in the church with regard to this family dynamic.

“Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments” (5:1-2). If you love a parent you love the parent's children. This does not necessarily follow in real life, but it does for our author. He is finding just one more way of stressing the importance of Christians loving one another. Loving God and loving people are two different, but nevertheless, inseparable things. We might legitimately extend it to all human beings, but the author focuses primarily on relations among Christians.

As we have heard before in 1 John these are the commandments: loving God and loving one's fellow Christian (4:21). They are not heavy demands, not because they are not serious, but because their fulfilment is part of the dynamic we looked at last week. We love because God first loved us (4:19) – the one affects the other. Love begets love.

Although we note an emphasis on love in the church, the writer does not neglect how love ties in with faith; particularly with regard to the issue of right belief. Earlier (4:1-6) he had used the language of victory in the context of not submitting to the false beliefs held by those in conflict with the writer. And even prior to this we hear about “little children,” “fathers” and “young people” with respect to the

threat of the world (2:15-17). Associated with that is the comment about “antichrists” who promote false teachings about Christ (2:18-19). Encouraging Christians about a faith that conquers the world, was just not about believing in Christ. The false teachers also believed that Jesus was the Son of God - but not in the way the author did. In 4:2 the false prophets, who claim the Spirit's inspiration, are said to be denying that Jesus Christ came in the flesh. That is also the issue in the opening statement of the letter where the writer affirms: “We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life” (1:1-2). Jesus was a real human being in history.

The issue among the believers seems to be the real humanity of Jesus. Some may have considered Jesus so divine that they were happy to speak of his baptism, but not of real human death; his being was such that he was not a full human being of flesh and blood. He only seemed like a human being. Its basis is not lack of faith, but an enthusiasm that goes too far in hailing Jesus' divinity to a point where the real human Jesus is denied. Its modern forms appear when people portray Jesus as a superman: never troubled, never sad, always on top of things, orderly and disciplined; and then present Christianity as a recipe for triumphant living. They forget Gethsemane and the cross.

Denying the humanity of Jesus is often associated with denying other people's humanity and our own. The author links loving God with right belief about Jesus and he links such right belief with loving people which also must include taking their humanity seriously. Those who claimed to be spiritual in the faith lacked a real love for fellow believers. "How does God's love abide in anyone," says the writer, "who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?" (3:17). How can one love God without loving one's brother or sister? How can one be so God-focused or God-connected that one fails to see one's own connection with others?

That's what it was like for some of the early Christians in our reading from Acts. Similar to some long-held Jewish views that they were God's only chosen people, some Christians believed that the good news of Jesus was reserved only for Jewish believers too. Faith in God through Jesus was only seemingly possible and acceptable through and among Jewish connections. This was thought to be true also in terms of the work of the Holy Spirit – reserved for a select few.

But when Gentiles or non-Jews began accepting the Christian message and receiving the Holy Spirit in their own Gentile Pentecost experience (Cornelius and Peter in 10:1-43), it meant that Jewish

Christians had to rethink what they believed about God; what they believed about themselves; and what they believed about Gentiles. They had to reconsider that God was also the God of Gentiles as well as them. They had to reconsider that they were not an exclusive community of faith. They had to reconsider that Gentiles could share with them in fulfilling God's purposes. More crucial to their new understanding was that by accepting Gentile Christians, they were to also extend to them Christ's commandment of loving one another.

To love others in Christ is to accept them regardless of their ethnic and cultural distinctions. We saw this last week in the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. In Christ, people have a common identity that transcends all kinds of barriers, although it does not negate or cancel out those distinctions. And as we also heard last week, this is possible when Christians abide in Christ and in Christ's love.

Today our Gospel reading from John chapter 15 emphasises this love. It seems that accepting Christ's love and sharing it with others is what really identifies the Christian community rather than any theoretical idea about Jesus. Thinking or talking about what you believe is good, but more important, I think, is how you live it out. And whatever it is that you may believe about Christ, it must be lived out in love. Jesus said, "If you keep my commandment, you will abide in my love" (Jn. 15:10).

Faith in Christ is not our only identity in the church. I think love is too. Love can be an identity marker for us as Christians. It is through loving relations with others that we are recognised as disciples of Jesus (Jn. 13:35). Just as 1 John has told us that “the victory that conquers the world is faith,” so too does love – love can conquer the worlds doubts and divisions.

Love for one another can become a backbone for Christian living just as much as the faith we confess. This must be our strength just as much as our faithfulness to any Christian doctrine. Our identity in love can help us overcome not only the world, as 1 John says, but also worldly interests that seek to weaken and fragment the church.

Maybe mothers or women are said to be the backbone of the church because they are seen to be more loving and caring to others. But the reality is that strength of love is for all in the church to exercise. And it is to transcend all kinds of barriers to help connect people to each other and Christ; rather than divide them. People are often prepared to go to great lengths and overcome whatever obstacles for the sake of their love for another.

And, maybe like Milo and his mum in the movie “Mars needs moms,” if those in the church mean that much to us, then to what

extent would we go to demonstrate love and preserve that relationship? The ultimate sacrifice of love, said Jesus, was that “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (Jn. 15: 13). So, what are you prepared to do in love for your church family? How far would you go for the one whom you love? Would you, like Milo, put your life on the line and go as far as Mars and back? Amen.