

Sermon for May 9, 2004.

Motherhood in a Changing World: A *Survivor's Manual*.

By Lone Jensen

This is a sermon about the present. But we begin in the past. Where our images of mothers have their deep roots. Take a walk with me through any major art museum where you will find one image that reoccur in a thousand variations; that of the Divine Mother holding the God Child. Here we have statue of a 3000 year old Egyptian Goddess Isis with the little God, Osiris in her lap. Now there is something to live up to. Think about that as you are trying to feed a decidedly un-godly two- year -old mashed peas. To get food into his moving mouth may seem like a much bigger operation than landing an aircraft carrier on a stormy sea. Well I got news for you: it is! Growing a child takes multiple and many skills unknown in the military, big co-operations or in most other well paid and compensated job. Which motherhood of course is not and yet it is. Remember there is a big difference between image and reality. As we move on into Medieval and Renaissance galleries we see Madonna portrayed the Queens of Heaven, standing on the globe with swirling stars overhead. Now when did you last felt like that: Queen of the Universe? Hard to do as you are driving kids to piano lessons, choir, soccer games, the

mall, the dentist, the thousands of places we have to go to now because we no longer have neighborhoods where kids can walk safely to the store nor indeed to most events. The car is where we find mothers these days. Queen of the carpool is more like it. Picture this painting: Modern Mom standing on top of her minivan with cell phones and planners circling her around her head. Feel free, by the way, if you are a mother, to remind your family that they are supposed to make you feel like the Queen of the Universe today! But back to the gallery where if you look closely you can see behind the Madonna's veil the primal and elemental powers of ancient Earth Goddesses. Who represent the ultimate life giving powers of the ever-birthing Universe. Now that is real power! Birth, as those who have done it knows, is about as primal as it gets. In my generation we gave birth in a cold tile and steel operating room, under the harsh glare of bright lights, no one else allowed in, and doctors and nurses told us exactly what to do. But out of that coldness came a warm tiny, crying, wrinkled, little thing that they placed on my belly and I wondered looking into that red wrinkled old man's baby face: *who are you really?* Such dark eyes, such tiny perfect fingers and toes, such energy.

And from the moment that cord is cut the child will do what it is called to do: grow, explore, ask, question, amaze, irritate,

shout, wonder. Babies eat and sleep and wake at the worst moments. I believe it was Mark Twain who said that if babies weren't so terribly cute few would surely survive childhood. But human beings follow an ancient command deep in our souls and genes and we do tend our young. When all goes well, that is. Nowadays fathers are in the delivery room too or perhaps it is the female spouse. Nowadays men too mother. Thank Goddess for that. But being a mother is not automatic. You have to learn how.

And it is not as sweet as the pictures tell you. In the earliest pictures Madonna hardly appears to be human at all and the child, is equally serious. But with the Renaissance and Baroque painters Mary emerges as a lovely human woman and the Christ child becomes as a real and chubby little baby. She smiles and the baby plays with her face, her veil or in some French paintings (leave it to those French) with her exposed breast. Beautiful young mothers grace the walls enthralled and in love with their babies. And yes, it is a love affair. Our earliest one and therein lies the rub. How we loved then and how we love now and the longing for being a child again ourselves can get all mixed up in how we do motherhood. Divine Motherhood who can live up to that? Light candles for the Madonna ok, but what about that inner voice that says what you ought to be like that?

If you did not grow up Catholic you might have missed the attributes given to Mary by church teachings, her supposed absolute obedience, her extreme humility, her famous virginity and her long suffering acceptance of her son's death. Not necessarily character traits that are possible or even desirable in a woman living in today's world. The real Mary, the mother of Jesus, was likely a simple peasant woman from Galilee without a fine blue cloak or a shiny gold halo, a woman who might not have been altogether happy with her son's mission. As any mother would she not have wanted him safe and out of trouble? According to the gospels, early in his ministry, she did come to see him with his brothers to try to talk some sense into him and get him to come home. (Gospel of Mark 3:31-35.) The human Mary was likely as different from the Queen of Heaven, Madonna image as any mother here today. Her voice is silent but her image has become larger than life, an impossible ideal.

And that is what this sermon is about: how our impossible saintly, overblown images of motherhood makes it harder for real mothers. Even if you did not grow up Catholic, that Madonna image, the archetype of the great infinitely good and giving mother is part of our collective psyche. She was reincarnated as the selfless, sacrificing Victorian Angel of the House and today still is

alive and well in many children's stories. It is an image that can indeed leave a woman self - less, that is without knowing who she is or what she wants. *The Giving Tree* is one example. It is a story about an apple tree (shades of Eve) that gives everything it has to a little boy. First it gives shade and limbs to climb in, then apples and a branch for a swing, then all its branches as lumber for his house when he marries and finally a stump to sit on in old age. What is wrong with that? Well the tree has no purpose other than giving. The boy just takes! For many women this is not a safe story. To be cut down in the name of love has all too real undertones in a world where too many women are battered in their own home. But if the endless giving is unrealistic so is the opposite image of the destructive and destroying mother. She is the bad witch who devours her children in fairy tales and stuffs poor Hansel in the oven. Eric Neumann calls her: "*the terrible mother*". Neither archetype holds the truth of what it means to be a real human mother. But these mother images holds sway in our dreams and hide in the dark chambers of our souls. They make it difficult to see clearly. Think about your own mothers for a moment. How many of us really see her as she is or was and not through the eyes of a four, ten or fourteen year old child? If you are a mother now how realistic are you about your limitations?

How guilty do you feel, on a daily, weekly basis?

When you get caught in the perfectionist, impossible and destructive mother myth, do not dwell there. Go read that other mother, Erma Bombeck for a reality check. She lived in an era when perfect mother images ruled on television and in magazines. Women like Jane Wyatt in "Father Knows Best", Harriet Nelson in "Ozzie and Harriet", and Barbara Billingsley in "Leave It to Beaver" glorified a sanitized version of motherhood. Bombeck wrote: *"They looked better cleaning their houses than most of us looked at our wedding. They never lost their temper, gained weight, spent more money than their husbands made, or gave viewers any reason not to believe they were living out their lives in celibacy."* Erma Bombeck, my heroine, was *"one of the not-quite-ready-for-prime-time mothers.* Bombeck wrote, *"Did you see the story in the paper about the woman who forgot one of her children in a laundromat restroom? She dares call herself a mother! How disgusting! What kind of mother would . . . ? It was a familiar phrase. Ten years and three children earlier, I had used it myself with just the right blend of shock and disapproval. Now I personally knew seven mothers who had done the same thing."*

I wonder how Erma Bombeck would have reacted to families of today. Who have expanded far beyond that fifties narrow image

an illusion really, kept pristine by everything *it did not show*. No black families were on TV back then. And a Lesbian couple having a baby together by artificial insemination or two men adopting a child, well that was far, far off the radar screen. Martians were welcome additions to prime time but not single mothers. Today we have any number of possible combinations that are in every sense of that word family. Grandmothers and fathers raise children too. What matter is that love is present, that the children are well cared for and that we openly and loudly support all kinds of families in that most important of all tasks: To grow a good human being.

Appeli writes: "*Our experience of our own mother is immense and long lasting, from the beginning of our life onward; it fills our childhood. The figure of this woman - to whom we belong more completely than to any other woman - accompanies us all the days of our lives.*" Even long after she is gone. My own mother died at 91 but her memory still haunts me. And therein lies the power and complexity of motherhood. Mothers have been given, on the one hand, too much credit and been remade in the image of self sacrificing, ever loving, sweet saints and on the other hand they have been given far too much blame especially by followers of Freud. Diseases that we now know are due to

chemical imbalances such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorders were once routinely blamed almost entirely upon mothers loving too little or mothers loving too much. Even today mothers blame themselves. Yet the truth is that all any human mother can do is love her children, do the best she can and hope that it will turn out all right. We are **not** all powerful, even though our young children may see us that way. Nor were our mothers. They too were shaped by the culture and life they grew up in, shaped by what they had been told was right to do. Our contemporary culture shapes motherhood too. The distances we have to travel, the fact that most mothers do work outside as well as inside their home, the fast paced information age, the mall culture, the speed and ease with which our children can get lured into trouble on the internet, the real dangers of drugs and glorified violence, all these make motherhood a battlefield. Do we have the training? Well maybe not but we do have some powerful weapons: love, appreciation, care, patience, and a sense of humor.

Barbara Crafton writes about unrealistic expectations: *Women are sometimes annoyed because their families don't respect the commitment of energy their work requires. We come home exhausted, and we are supposed to be Mother Of The Year. There's nothing wrong with an exhausted mother cuddling her child after a*

*dinner that came out of a can. The cuddle will be remembered.
The can will be forgotten.*

She is right. Let us also remember the blessings of contemporary life. Frozen dinner and cans are available. Children usually live to adulthood. Not so long ago parents were defenseless against a host of illnesses and expected to lose some of their offspring. In many countries they still do. And when it comes to grandmothers well let me tell you the picture has changed. As in this really bad poem:

*In the dim and distant past, When life's tempo wasn't fast
Grandma used to rock and knit, Crochet for us and baby sit
When the kids were in a jam, They could always call on "Gram"
In that day of gracious living, Grandma was the gal for giving
But today she's in the gym, Exercising to keep slim.
She's off touring with the bunch. Or taking clients out to lunch
Nothing now seems to stop or block her, Now that Grandma's off
her rocker!!*

As a grand mother I say: here's to purple hats! Thankfully, women still have choices in this country. Choices also as to whether they want to be mothers at all. Which makes it a privilege too. And harder to understand when things like child abuse happen. If your own relationship with your mother was

marked by conflict then Mother's Day may be difficult for you. Remember though that the real woman may not be the image you have of her. Healing comes when one can forgive the real human mother for her mistakes and shortcomings and relegate the bad internal mother image to one's own psyche. Where one can, after all, better control it. Forgiving does not mean forgetting or saying that what happened is all right, but it does mean letting go and moving on with one's life. If on this day you are mourning the loss of your mother then let the good memories be a comfort. Allow yourself time to heal.

To be a mother or a father means that we are always vulnerable. We want to protect, to shelter and make sure nothing bad happens to our children. It is a hard thing to do in today's world, but I doubt it was ever easy. And then we have to open our hands and let them go out into that big world.

If being a mother is hard, the task of stepmother is often thankless. For not only don't you have the memories of how wonderful and cute they were as babies, to help you through the tough times, but your role is unclear. How much should you do, how much will they accept and how do you act? Frankly the fairy tales do not help a bit either. How about a story about the **good** stepmother? In these days of blended families it is about time that

someone wrote one.

To mothers here today who have managed to be not perfect, but good enough, we owe you our thanks. Because of your love our society will be better and because of your care our children have a good chance of growing up to be good people. And please do not try to be a perfect mother. First of all it doesn't work and secondly what kind of example is that for your children? They may think they have to be perfect too.

To all the women who gave us the precious gift of life we give thanks! Happy Mother's Day!