

The Pink Rose

Psalm 139:1-17, Luke 1:5-19

Jeanne Stevenson Moessner

University of Dubuque Theological Seminary, Dubuque, Iowa

Many preachers approach the Mother's Day sermon as a gardener would touch a trellis of wild roses, aware of the beauty of the flowers, equally cognizant of the thorns. For many women, this traditional Sunday in May is a day of great pain and scarring memories that tear into the future as a thorn would into the flesh. The following sermon was used at a Service for Wholeness for Mother's Day in Birmingham, Alabama, May, 1997. This service was jointly sponsored by Edgewood Presbyterian Church (PCUSA) and *Resolve*, a national network of support for women and men dealing with infertility and loss.

(Note: For a visual aid, an empty vase was placed on the pulpit. A red, white, and pink rose were added as the sermon progressed.)

The Pink Rose

Red roses grew over a stone archway next to my childhood home. It seemed they always appeared shortly before Mother's Day. As in a May ritual, my father would cut a handful of these wild red roses, and my brothers and I would wear them on Mother's Day as a sign that our mother was living. What is remarkable to me in retrospect is that my father and mother also wore red roses for so many years. My grandmothers lived into their nineties.

It is in honor of all the mothers who are living that I place this red rose in the vase. In the South, it is a custom on Mother's Day to wear a red rose if your mother is still living.

It is in honor of all the mothers who are no longer among us that I place a white rose in the vase. For, again, in the South, we wear a white rose on Mother's Day for the mothers who have died and passed over.

There are other losses to be remembered. Mother's Day can be especially painful for women and men who wanted to become parents and could not. *Sing, O Barren One* written by Mary Calloway traces the theme of barren women in the Old and New Testaments.¹ These were all women who wanted to have children and could not. You will recall them. Sarah in Genesis 11; Rebecca in Genesis 25; Rachel in Genesis 30; Leah in Genesis 29; the wife of Manoah in Judges 13; Hannah in I Samuel; Elizabeth in Luke 1—the New Testament text today; and, Zion in Isaiah 54:1ff: “Sing, O barren one, who did not bear; break forth into singing and cry aloud, you who have not been in travail!” This last passage is the one from which the book took its title, *Sing, O Barren One*. The biblical material focuses on barren women rather than barren men. The barrenness motif or theme functioned to show that the gift of life came from Yahweh (God) alone. Barrenness was seen as a curse and humiliation. Fruitfulness was seen as a reward for obedience.

In each of the examples of the barren women, a son was given: Sarah bore Isaac; Rebecca gave birth to Jacob and Esau; Rachel to Joseph and Benjamin; Leah to Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, and six others; the wife of Manoah to Samson; Hannah

to Samuel; Zion to Jerusalem (sons); and Elizabeth to John the Baptist. In each of these cases of barrenness, there is a fruitfulness—the gift of life.

Where does a woman who has not been given this gift of life in children connect on Mother's Day? Where do the modern-day barren women connect with scripture? The only barren women in scripture other than priestesses are Tamar in II Samuel and Jephthah's daughter in Judges 11. Tamar was raped by her brother Amnon and lived the rest of her life "a desolate woman." Jephthah's daughter, a virgin, was killed by her father as a result of his foolish vow. These are the childless women of scripture.

If the red rose symbolizes living mothers, the white rose mothers who have died, what symbol do we have on Mother's Day for the women who never bore, for the women still dealing with infertility, for the women waiting for a child to be placed through adoption, for the women whose dreams to get married and raise a family did not materialize? What symbol do we have for mothers who have lost children through miscarriage, stillbirth, AIDS, accident, injury, or illness?

I once held a luncheon for a friend who brought a guest from a small town, a woman whom I had never met. Within ten minutes of our lunch, this guest told me she had lost a daughter nine years earlier. The daughter would have been twenty-seven years of age this May. She was killed in an automobile accident by a young man who crossed the median and hit her car. He was on drugs. Her life, just on the threshold of adulthood and great promise, ended. There will be twenty-seven roses on the altar of her hometown church on the Sunday in May nearest the date of her death. That is often Mother's Day Sunday. Each year, her parents add one more rose. It is for her mother and others like her for whom Mother's Day this year will contain a mixture of feelings that I add to the vase the pink rose. For all the mothers—and for those who want to be mothers—I add the pink rose.

For those who are foster mothers, and stepmothers, I add the pink rose. I remember the birth mothers who placed their children for adoption. I remember the adoptive mothers who received the gift of life through this placement. I remember those of you facing empty nests at home; those dealing with children who are emotionally lost to you; those whose mothers were emotionally disconnected (from you).

On Mother's Day, this pink rose can also symbolize the "mothers of the church," a term used in the African-American tradition for the women who hold the church together through nurturing, caring, mentoring. When I stood in the drugstore picking out cards for Mother's Day, I chose a special one for the person who had mothered me in the faith. For those of you who are spiritual models and mentors, I place this pink rose.

What do we do with all these varied experiences on Mother's Day? May I suggest that we bring our flowers—red, white, and pink—to the altar of a God who carries, feeds, protects, heals, guides, disciplines, comforts, washes, and clothes us as children. Many biblical passages portray God as doing these for us.

Birthing—Yahweh speaks: "Listen to me, House of Jacob...you who have been carried since birth, whom I have carried since the time you were born. In your old age, I shall be still the same..." (Isaiah 46: 3-4).

Comforting—"Like a son comforted by his mother, will I comfort you" (Isaiah 66: 13-14).

Washing—Yahweh says: "I shall pour clean water over you, and you will be cleansed; I shall cleanse you of all your defilement" (Ezekiel 36:25).

Healing—"God will be with them; God will wipe away every tear from their eyes and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more..." (Revelation 21:4).

Suffering—Hosea depicts God as caring for a very difficult child: "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and I called my son out of Egypt. But the more I called to them, the further they went from me...I myself taught Ephraim to walk, I took them in my arms; yet they have not understood that I was the one looking after them. I led them with reins of kindness, with leading strings of love" (Hosea 11:1-4). There are many places in the Bible that speak of God's mothering characteristics.

How can we re-image God so that we can connect in ways that are more genuine to our experience? A woman who had had a mastectomy once told me, "After my surgery, I could not image God as a male. I have had to image God as Mother Hen. It is only God as mother hen who would know what it is like to lose a wing." She was referring to Matthew 23:37 and Luke 13:34, passages in which Jesus spoke of a desire to gather the children of Jerusalem as a hen gathers her brood under her wings. In a similar way, I have always known that if I were to ever lose a child, the visits I would want most would be from those who had experienced the same. I would also need a God who would know what it was like to lose a child.

I can also re-image God as adoptive parent. Whereas God is often imaged as birth parent, the One who creates us and even gives us a "second birth" (John 3), there are actually more passages in the New Testament that speak of our adoption into the family of faith through Jesus Christ as Firstborn. The book of Ephesians in particular presents God as adoptive parent. God has destined us for adoption as children with an inheritance (Ephesians 1:5-14). God also knows the empty pain of childlessness when someone does not choose to come into the adoptive family of faith.

Various theologians such as Jürgen Moltmann write about the woundedness of God, the vulnerability of God to pain.² God lost a son at the place of the crucifixion. It would take an all-knowing, all-seeing, vulnerable, and loving God to understand what the roses signify. This is what Psalm 139, our Old Testament reading, and, a beloved Psalm among women, indicates: Our God is a God who formed our inward parts, knit us together in our mother's womb, and saw our unformed substance. It is from such a God that healing may one day come, a healing that extends beyond childhood, before birth, to the very womb. This healing is to be found somehow in the very womb of God.

Yes, it is an all-knowing, all-seeing, vulnerable, and loving God who is sufficient to embrace what we bring today—the red roses, the white roses, the pink roses—*especially* the pink roses.

May this bouquet that we bring be held close to the very heart of God.

Notes

¹ Mary Calloway, *Sing, O Barren One* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1986), SBL Dissertation, Series 91.

² Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).