

Scripture: Isaiah 49:13-18

Text: Isaiah 49:15-16

Message: God's Love Is Compared to a Mother's Love

May 10, 2015; Bethel CRC, Brockville, ON

Baptism (Mother's Day)

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People of God:

Ah, Mother's Day. Our hearts and minds are filled with thoughts about the love of mothers and our love for mothers. In front of church we have a happy Mom and Dad and a very cute baby Jayden. We see the joy of the grandparents. We see their expressions of love. We hear God's promises of love. And God's love is like a mother's love.

Isaiah speaks of a mother's love in a very direct and moving way. In verse 15 we read, "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne?" A mother goes through so much to give birth to a child. When that child is born it is a precious possession. A bond is immediately formed between mother and child. She gives it food from her own body. In many ways a mother gives of herself for the sake of the child.

The bond of love which develops is extremely strong. It seems that nothing can break it. Not the pain of birth, not the sleepless nights that follow with feedings at all hours. No matter how sick the child gets, the mother never gives up her love for the child. Could it ever be that a mother forgets her child? The image in Isaiah can be understood in two ways: very literally, can a mother forget her child while that child is nursing? Or more figuratively, can a mother forget her child with whom she has developed that close, personal bond as a nursing mother? Could a mother have no compassion for that child? It's hard to imagine.

God presents such an extreme question to the people of Israel who seem to be doubting *his* love. Earlier Isaiah prophesied about Israel's destruction and exile because of her sin and unfaithfulness. Now he comes with words of comfort and promise of deliverance from that exile.

But the people have a hard time believing it. In the middle of all these promises of hope we read (v.14), "But Zion said, "The LORD has forsaken me, the Lord has forgotten me." Sure, you can talk all you want, Isaiah. Sure God says all these nice thing. But look at us--we're slaves; we're in exile. Jerusalem is destroyed. The temple is destroyed. Life is miserable. There is no hope. The Lord has forsaken and forgotten us.

Does God love us? How can we know? What is that love like? How can I know God's love? Maybe you have the feeling that God doesn't really care about you. Why should he

love me? God doesn't seem to have helped me before. Why should he bother now?

Maybe your circumstances are making you question God and his love. He doesn't seem to be showing much love now. Don't you care, God? Why is this happening to me? to my friend, to my family?

"Can a mother forget the child she loves?" God confronts us with something so real, so much a part of our experience.

If we were blessed with a loving mother, we know what that love is like. We may know how unbreakable that bond of love is. Therefore we would know exactly what God is talking about. It is not an abstract or theoretical idea. This love is real and human and part of our lives and experience.

Then we can only humbly say, "Of course God has not forgotten me. My mother never left me on the street. She has never forsaken me. No matter what I did, even if it hurt her, she would still love me. So also, God would never forget me. That's how God loves me."

At least *most* mothers do not forget their babies; *most* mothers have compassion on their children. But not all. The cases of child abuse which are being discovered or reported in our society today are growing rapidly. Father's are certainly involved in this. In some cases, mothers are as well. Where is the mother's love? Where is the father's love? Where is the compassion for the child she has borne? What has happened to that beautiful bond?

That cruelty, that lack of compassion is not limited to living children. We are also aware of the horrors of abortion. Babies are being killed before they even have a chance to experience outwardly the love of a mother. For whatever reason, people make that choice. Where is love? Where is compassion?

God knows that humans are not perfect. He knows that parental love may fail. But he makes it clear that *his* love is still greater. "Though she may forget--as hard as it may seem to be to believe that, as impossible as it may seem that a mother *would* forget, human nature is such that it *is* possible. But even though *she* may forget, I will *not* forget you! My love is greater even than a mother's love. My love is unfailing."

Remember who is saying this. These are not Isaiah's words. These are not my words. These are not the words of some human father or mother. This is God speaking. This is the God who revealed himself as Yahweh--the great I AM. In his revelation of himself, in his very name, he reveals his faithfulness, his constancy. God never changes. He is the same

yesterday, today, and tomorrow. God does not slip and slide and waver and change his mind. What he says, he means. When he says something, he does it.

It is from such a God that we hear these words: "Though she may forget, *I will not forget you!* You are my child. Jayden, Ashley, Jordan, Jack, Jane, put your own name there....you are my son and daughter through Jesus Christ, my Son. You are precious in my sight. *I will not forget you.* My love is always there!" This is not just for that other person. This is not just for the "better" people. This is God's word of love to *you*: I will not forget you. I love you!

God also backs up what he has just said. It is not really necessary that he do that. His word, his promise should be enough because of who he is. Yet God wants to reinforce what he has said. So he adds the assurance of v. 16: "See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are ever before me."

I'm not sure if students still do it, but when I was in high school, students would write homework assignments on the palms of their hands. Especially if it was to remind themselves of an important test which they had to study for. If they wrote it on their palms, they would be sure to see it later and be reminded.

That constant reminder is what God is talking about here. God uses the symbolism of the human body to relate to us. We, his people, his children, are engraved on a part of God which is constantly in front of him. The palms are often open so the reminder is constant. No matter what is being done, our hands are almost always before us. So with God, and therefore also with the engraving on those palms. We are always before him.

Notice too that God has *engraved* us on his palms. It is not just with a pen or marker which wipes off or wears off after a while. No, we are engraved. We are dug into the skin. It is like branding cattle where the mark is burned into the skin so it never leaves. Or it is like the furniture makers who engrave their name in the furniture to show who made it. We are a permanent part of the palms of God's hands. Think of the nail marks in the hands of the resurrected and ascended Jesus. Think of Jesus' words to Thomas after the resurrection: "See my hands" (see John 20:24-31). Engraved as a reminder of how much God loves us, that he would give his Son to forgive our sin.

Therefore we can know that we will never be forgotten or forsaken. God has a permanent reminder on his palms. We are constantly and permanently before him.

God also adds, "Your walls are ever before me." Think of what this meant to the exiles. Jerusalem was destroyed, flattened. Not a wall was left standing. They were vulnerable, with no security. Yet the reminder which God has before him is of the walls of Jerusalem. It is not a destroyed Jerusalem, but one with walls. It is Jerusalem restored to her original beauty. God does not see his people as without hope or as being lost. They are restored as a secure and stable people.

This is God's assurance, his promise, his invitation. God looks at us in the context of his love. He does not see us as ruined sinners. Rather, we are restored in Christ. Christ took us, as unworthy as we were, and called us sons and daughters of God. We are washed clean of all our sin. We are given that sign and seal of God's love: you are my child!

That is the love of God. It is not some strange, religious, other-worldly experience. It's not some formal list of doctrine or ritual. God's love is like a mother's love, only more sincere, more perfect, more constant.

There seems to be no equal to the wonder and greatness of a mother's love. For that we praise God and give him thanks. We pray that God will give our mothers all that they need to continue to show that love.

But we also realize that there *is* a greater love. It is the love of God, the unfailing, constant love of God. It is shown to us in the sending of his only Son to pay for our sins. It is always with us in our joys and sorrows, in every experience of life. We can know this love and be sure of it because it is like the love of a faithful and caring mother. Know this love. Share this love.

Amen.