

Fifth Sunday in Easter, Year B
May 14, 2006

I want to acknowledge first, this morning, the wide range of emotions that we as a congregation have experienced over the past week. In the past week we have elected a new bishop—and in that we have experienced joy and perhaps some apprehension as well. In the past week we have had to deal with the death of a member of our parish, Steven Coonrod—and in that we have experienced sadness, but also compassion. And finally, in the last week we have announced the start of a capital campaign to raise almost \$350,000 to pay for some long-deferred maintenance and repair of our physical plant—and in that we have experienced some fear, but also a great deal of hope and excitement.

When we face events in our lives that, like these, challenge us to deal with a wide range of emotions in a short period of time, it is often helpful to remind ourselves of those things that we know from experience that we can rely on. To, in essence, turn inward to remind ourselves of those things that keep us centered and grounded in times of change and significant events.

And so we come to today. A day when we are blessed with the opportunity to recognize one of the most significant of those influences in our lives—our mothers. Today is the day when we honor Mothers. And interestingly, even though Mothers Day is a secular holiday, our Gospel text is very appropriate for today.

Listen to what Jesus says, "I will not leave you orphaned . . ." One translation says, "I will not leave you comfortless." Both translations speak of a God who comes to us in times of change and emotional extremes, to comfort us, to ground us. Sounds a lot like Mother's Day to me. We do often refer to God as Father. But God is also like a Mother who comforts her children. And where is that comfort to be found? How is it that God will "comfort" us? Well, that is the question for today.

FIRST, JESUS SAYS HE WILL COMFORT US BY HIS PRESENCE.

In this part of the Gospel of John, Jesus is going away. But he says God will send a comforter- the Holy Spirit. Jesus promises that the disciples will not be alone. God's *Spirit* will be with them.

Years ago there was a country-western song titled, "Roses for Mama." In the song, it is Mother's Day, and a man goes to a florist shop to buy his mother a bouquet. He knows he should visit his mother, but he has more exciting plans, so he decides to send her flowers instead. At the florist shop, the man encounters a little boy who wants to buy some roses for his mother, but he doesn't have enough money. The man gives the boy some money, then buys his mother's bouquet. As the man drives away from the florist shop, he happens to pass by a cemetery. Glancing in the cemetery, he sees the little boy kneeling at a grave, a bouquet of roses in his hand.

The man pulls in to the cemetery and asks the boy what he's doing. The boy explains that his mother has been dead a year, and that he comes there all the time to talk to her and, on this special day, to give her flowers. The man then turns around and drives back to the florist. He asks the florist if his mother's flowers have been delivered yet. When the florist tells him no, the man cancels the delivery because he wants to deliver them himself.

There is nothing that says "I love you" like simply being present. Children need parents who are there for them ". Aging parents need children who will come to see them. So, when Jesus leaves his disciples, he wants them to know he is not forsaking them. "I will not leave you orphaned," he says, "I will come to you." Jesus is present for us as he was present for the disciples—through the power of the Holy Spirit. I have seen an experienced that presence in this community. Our Savior, Jesus' presence is almost tangible when we gather. Whether it is two or three or a hundred of us. It always seems clear to me that when we are together as community, we are somehow "more" than our assembled number. Because Jesus is *present* with us.

So first, Jesus is PRESENT. But there is a SECOND way in which Christ comforts his disciples (and us).

JESUS COMFORTS WITH UNDERSTANDING AND LOVE.

Physical presence is wonderful, of course, but it is not all that it can be if it is not backed up with love and understanding. We need not only someone who is with us in body, we need someone who understands and forgives us. And no one was more understanding than Jesus.

Holding little children in his arms. Showing concern for those with physical challenges, for the person whose life has been broken, for the penitent thief on the cross. Jesus is the incarnation of God's concern for us. And that is wonderful and amazing Good News. The comfort that the Spirit provides is the comfort Christ would provide were he still here physically. It has always been the case that when people of faith express that faith to each other and to others, it is most powerful when that faith is shared through compassion. "I will not leave you comfortless . . ." Jesus says. *Jesus is present. Jesus does understand.*

But there's yet another, a third, aspect to the presence of God in Jesus Christ in our lives. God not only sends the Spirit to be with us. God not only sends the Spirit to empathize with us and comfort us.

THIRD, GOD IN CHRIST ALSO GIVES US THE POWER TO CONQUER OUR CHALLENGES, OUR FEARS, OUR PROBLEMS.

"After a little while the world will behold Me no more;" Jesus said, "but you will behold Me. Because I live, *you* shall live also."

How many people have been encouraged by those words? "Because I live, *you* shall live also." Because he is with us, we can cope, we can endure, we can persevere, we can succeed.

A parent who is there present wonderful. A parent who understands is even better. But best of all is a parent who prepares us to cope with life and gives us the tools to succeed in life!

In 1942, hysteria over Japanese involvement in World War II led to the relocation of some 100,000 Japanese Americans to internment camps. In one of these camps, Carole Doi, a third-generation Japanese American, was born. Years later, Carole married a man who had also spent time in the camps. When she delivered their baby daughter, they noticed that the child's feet turned inward, the toes facing each other. Carole was determined to do whatever it would take to help her daughter walk normally.

For four years Carole provided her daughter with corrective shoes. The little girl was walking normally by age six, but Carole wasn't satisfied. "I wanted her to do anything in which she would use her legs," she said. The girl chose ice skating.

The little girl was a natural on the ice. Before long, the youngster was bugging her mother for more rink time. She'd refuse to leave the ice until she got a particular move right. Soon Carole was rising at 4 a.m. to get her daughter to the rink. Finally, after 15 years of lessons, young Kristi Yamaguchi represented her country in the Olympics.

As the U.S. flag was hoisted during the 1992 medals ceremony, Carole and Jim Yamaguchi watched Kristi receive the gold medal. Kristi Yamaguchi stood on that victory platform because of a mother who stood behind her and helped her conquer the challenges that life had presented to her.

"I will not leave you comfortless; I will come to you," said Jesus, "...because I live, you shall live also." There it is! There is the promise we need most of all: The Spirit that comforts us is not only one of presence, not only one of understanding, it is one of overcoming. It is like a mother slowly helping her daughter walk with straight feet. It is like a community of people caring for each other and celebrating with each other. It is the Spirit of God that gives us wings and the ability to fly.

We honor our mothers this morning. But more importantly, we honor God who is like a loving parent who is ever present, ever empathizing and ever giving us the strength to overcome. Because God lives, we can live! And will! Amen.