

May 11, 2008
Minister's Reflection

“Teaching Love”

What do any of us know about love? Chances are, whatever it is we know, or think we know about what love is, about how to love – chances are, we learned it from our mothers, or from whomever filled the role of mother in our very early lives. And for the unlucky ones, the ones without a mother or other person who loved them unconditionally or loved them simply the best that she could, some of these unlucky ones never do learn the lessons of love.

I learned from my mother that love was complicated. My mother's lessons about love, the ways that she showed love, and sometimes did not, were complicated. She had learned from her mother that there was never enough love to go around. That love was a luxury, something frivolous and possibly dangerous. My mother was determined to teach her own children different lessons about love.

And she tried her best. The truth was, she wasn't really cut out for motherhood. Not all of us are. The love-deprived little girl she had been was at war with her progressive theories of child-rearing and her idealized image of motherhood, so that her love was often something that ran hot and cold; her own need for love, attention and admiration was often in conflict with her desire to give those things to us, her daughters.

A frustrated actress, her favorite role was Medea. Remember Medea? She's the character who murdered her children and served them up to their father for dinner, to get back at him for being unfaithful. As I say, love is complicated.

And I adored her, and still do. She was very funny, creative, temperamental, glamorous and fascinating. She was never boring. She made my friends' mothers look

faded and lifeless. I would not have traded her for any other mother in the world. So that's another thing she taught me about love. Love makes you forgive a lot.

I also learned about that love was that it was wonderful when you received it, but not something you could count on. Maybe this is a lesson we all learn, to different degrees, at some point in our lives. Does any child really receive perfect love from his or her parents? Given that our parents are imperfect, I doubt it. I suspect that all of us carry around some ancient hurts, some lingering fear of love withheld, some unsatisfied longing for unconditional love. After all, our mothers cannot – should not – jump to our every demand. Our mothers cannot – should not – be expected to indulge us every minute of every day, to be endlessly patient and tolerant, self-sacrificing and wise. So it's inevitable that we will be disappointed, even disillusioned by our first loves, our mothers, our Goddesses.

And so we go in search of other divinities. Lovers and mates, of course. Professional success, cherished belongings, maybe alcohol. Ideals. Education. Justice. And God. A father- mother-god who will accept us, comfort us, forgive us and protect us and, ultimately, offer us the unconditional love, the complete union with the mother that we reluctantly left behind us with our infancy.

Or, alternatively, an angry and demanding god, a punishing god. And our choice of gods reflects our understanding of the nature of the world – not only our image of parenthood, but our view of the universe as loving, indifferent, or hostile.

Because mothers, and mother-figures, teach us not only how to love – or not love -- each other, but how to love – or not love -- the world. They teach us, by word or demonstration, whether the world is trustworthy or not, basically benign or not. Worthy

of our devotion or not. Whether it is safe to love, not only our mates and our children and our friends; our work, our pastimes and our dreams; but whether it is safe to love our very lives.

Poor mothers. This is a heavy responsibility. Luckily for all of us, mothers come in many forms. No one mother, or father, has to go it alone. This is the potential and power of community. Of extended families, teachers, parents of friends... and churches.

When we stumble as parents, and we will, a carefully chosen community is there to pick us up – but also to offer our children some understanding, some emotional reassurance, some evidence that love is here for them, that love is their right, that they are lovable. Mothers teach us about love, but they don't do it alone. So let us choose carefully who will help us to mother our children, and who will mother us when we are all grown up. Who – what community, or what gods; what ideals, what hopes, will help us to believe in love. What mothers, fathers, friends and teachers will teach us what we need to know about love: that love is complicated; that love requires forgiveness, yes; but also that love is our birthright.

And may we never forget that we are called to love each other, to mother the world in return. Let us always remember that this work of mothering, this work of loving, is holy work.

Amen.