

What I learned

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Saint John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on the Sixth Sunday of Easter, Rogation Sunday and Mother's Day, May 9, 2010.

But the advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. John 14: 26

During this Eastertide season, we observe Rogation Sunday today, from the Latin, *rogare*, "to ask." In more rural times in an agricultural economy, God's blessing was asked on the newly planted crops. Today, we ask God's blessing not only on our gardening, but on any new beginnings as well.

Today is also Mother's Day. This is, of course, not a religious holiday, but a secular one. It was originally proposed by Julia Ward Howe, author of "Battle hymn of the Republic," and became official at the urging of Anna Jarvis who persuaded President Woodrow Wilson to proclaim the second Sunday in May as a day to honor all mothers.

While God is above human description, we use human characteristics to describe God, most of which are masculine. We speak of the face and arms and mind and voice of God who is strong and loving as well as stern and demanding. I think many of us would feel the same description could apply to one or both of our parents. Jesus referred to God as "Father," while God is at the same time a nurturing, protecting and sacrificial mother figure. In the 15th century, Dame Julian of Norwich, a very spiritual but unorthodox and reclusive woman, referred to God as "Our mother God."

Jesus was brought up in a religious household in which his own mother taught him about faith. Mary remains as the most honored of persons in history because she was chosen by God to bear the Christ child, the source of our salvation.

Most of us learn about God from our parents, especially our mother. As times goes on, I have valued what my own mother taught me about faith that influenced my spiritual development. She had her strengths and weaknesses and not a few foibles. She went through the Great Depression in the 1930s without losing anything. Yet, like many of her generation, she always feared she might lose it all. My mother hid her low self-esteem in being gregarious and sociable. Her approach to life was always to expect the worst because she felt better when it didn't happen, not realizing the pall of gloom she cast over everything. Not comfortable with silence, she would bait us with controversial subjects she knew would get us all going.

As the wife of a priest, she reveled in her role as the rector's wife with all its social obligations. At the age of forty, she was suddenly and tragically widowed, left to raise her four sons, the youngest of whom was only two. We had to move out of the rectory and find another place to live and leave our schools and friends. My father had no life insurance or social security, but with the Church Pension Fund, some savings and a small income we got by. She worried her way through life and we sometimes felt that we were raising our selves and her along with us.

Her loneliness as a young widow and her own insecurities and fears left her anxious for the company of men. She flirted with every delivery man, repairmen and door to door salesman who ever came around, including one who sold her a complete set of the encyclopedia we could ill afford. When Mormon missionaries came calling, she invited them in and engaged them in religious discussion until they wished they had never knocked on the door. When I flew out to

Oregon shortly before she died the only person who was able to rouse her from her lethargic and very weak state was a man, a physical therapist who convinced her to get out of bed and walk.

My mother was a woman of great faith and we were always involved and active in the life of the church and if we ever missed a Sunday, she would declare that we were all “acting like perfect heathens.” Wanting to be of help to people, she would volunteer me to do things for people. Having been raised in the Swedenborgian Church, she had a profound and unshakeable faith in the presence of angels and the afterlife. I used to scoff at the idea of angels until once I met those “messengers of God,” a total stranger whom I had never seen before who helped me out of a difficulty never to be seen again. My brothers and I have all remained close to the church, never letting the shortcomings of the institutional church get in the way of our faith.

My mother taught us about God, Jesus, prayer, life and death, ethics, and morality. She taught me that I was created as one of God’s own for a purpose. She taught me that we can’t possibly like everyone and not everyone can like us, but we treat people with respect and courtesy all the same. When I worried over the normal insecurities of youth, she, the great worrier, assured me that I should take things in stride and be philosophical about life.

She taught me to be conscientious in whatever I did and to be reliable and meticulous in my dealings with people. She taught me self-reliance that includes knowing when and how to ask for help. She instilled in me a sense of duty, reliability, and good manners based on thoughtfulness and common sense. She drilled into me the finer points of the English language and grammar. I inherited her appreciation for quotes of famous people and when she frequently worried over something, I would remind her of Mark Twain’s observation that he had known a great many troubles, most of which never happened.

I learned early on that life isn’t fair and was never meant to be. I learned that in family and friendships, we might disagree and even get irritated and still respect each other. It is easy to be critical of our parents until we have children of our own and then realize what a tough job it is. One of the most important things I know now is that we never grow up until we stop blaming our parents and start taking responsibility for ourselves. I learned to think for myself and to test and challenge old assumptions that I learned, some of which I found no longer acceptable. I do appreciate the enduring values that shaped my thinking and character.

When Jesus said that he would not leave us orphaned and that the Holy Spirit would guide us, I am reminded of how the Holy Spirit works through those closest to us, beginning with our parents who nurture us to maturity.

Our mothers are with us in this life from the very moment we are born until they die. Yet, somehow, there is something of them that lives on in us when we hear ourselves reacting the way they did and using some of their same expressions. Because no one knows us as well as our mother, we learn that we can try to fool some of the people some of the time, but we can’t, we simply can’t fool “Mom.” Those of you who are children and those of you who have children know what I am talking about!

There is much we owe to the one who gave birth to us and nurtured us. It is she whom we honor, pray for and remember today.