

First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Burlington, Vermont

Date: May 12, 2013

Title: “Icons for Mother’s Day”

Pastor: The Reverend Peter Cook

Scripture Readings: Acts 16:16-34

16One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. 17While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, “These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.” 18She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, “I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.” And it came out that very hour.

19But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities. 20When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, “These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews 21and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.” 22The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. 23After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. 24Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

25About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. 26Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone’s chains were unfastened. 27When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. 28But Paul shouted in a loud voice, “Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.” 29The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. 30Then he brought them outside and said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” 31They answered, “Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.” 32They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. 33At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. 34He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

In the Orthodox Church, when you go to worship you will see many icons. Icons offer vivid images which lead us to reflect on our own lives. They do not tell us what to think, as much as invite us to think and reflect on what Christ means in our own lives. On this Mother’s Day, I thought I would take a different approach and simply paint some pictures of mothers; pictures which invite us all to think about discipleship and spiritual growth in our lives. May these images encourage you to reflect and remember stories about your mom, or those who had a mother-like impact on your life.

Mothers, of course, have so many virtues, and they also have their foibles and limitations like all of us. Usually when we think about our moms, or our own sense of what it means to be a mother, we have a variety of feelings. Sometimes we feel gratitude for what our moms did for us. Other times we cultivate a compassion for the struggles they have had to face to care for us, or to make ends meet. Sometimes being a mom is really wonderful, and sometimes it's really tough. As we ponder what our mothers mean to us, or what motherhood mean to us, I offer these icon word images for your consideration:

Let's start with my grandmother. Her name was Margaret. Margaret was a dancer and English major. She spent her professional life raising four children with her husband Joe, while working full time as a high school teacher in an inner city school in East Oakland. When she was done teaching she would come home—bone tired—but manage to prepare a wonderful meal for her family. They had very little money, but Margaret insisted that everyone sit at the table and eat her famous pot roast or Swedish meatballs, while making room for a generous portion of angel food cake with green frosting. It was all served on nice china and linens, and during these meals, she engaged her family in civilized conversation.

Another image of motherhood is very fresh in my mind. Last night was the high school prom in Burlington. My memories of my Junior prom had something to do with wearing a baby blue polyester tux with, wide lapels, a shirt with a big collar, and a velveteen bow tie, having dinner at a really bad Chinese restaurant, and riding in a white limousine with a date where we bored each other.

My wife Martha took a pass.

As Madeline prepared for the Prom, Martha sought to offer Madeline my daughter a little motherly advice as she headed to the prom just to pull the pressure down. Madeline, have a good time. But remember that the junior prom will not be the highlight of your life. Don't expect it to be that. If in fact you get deluded into thinking your prom will be the highlight of your life, then that means you will have a rather stinky life ahead of you. So have some fun but try to keep all of this in some perspective.

A third image comes from the book of Acts, there was a slave girl who told fortunes to make a lot of money for her owners. The slave girl was being exploited by these men. Enter Paul and Silas, who released this girl from her bondage when they converted her to Christianity. Paul and Silas, however, found themselves beaten and flogged by a mob before landing in jail.

The mob violence and the imprisonment were brought about by owners who complained to the Roman Government that Paul and Silas efforts deprived them of profit. In those days it was illegal to be a Christian. This is a story about giving life to someone in the face of death...

The story in Acts made me think of another image. In the movie the Blind Side, we are told a true story about a prosperous family in Mississippi who decided that they would adopt a young man, Michael, who had been abandoned by his biological mother when he was 7 and spent his life in various foster homes. The 17 year old high school student had the gift of being able to play football but had considerable academic limitations. The mother in this family was deeply immersed in high society in this Mississippi Town, decided to stick her neck out and effectively become the new mother of this young man. Michael's new mother became his advocate to ensure

Michael received the extra tutoring he needed to graduate from high school and get a football scholarship to attend Old Miss.

Michael's journey was not easy. At one point Michael decided to run a way from his new home and return back to the ghetto where he came from. In one scene, Michael found himself staying in a room surrounded by his old gun toting, drinking peers who did drugs and engaged in prostitution. After two days, Michael mother found him, and firmly confronted these people and their death dealing ways out side the drug house. Michael's mom was as tough as nails where she advocated on behalf of Michael, and then she brought him back home. Michael's Mom helped him navigate through some other tough situations which allowed him to eventually attend Old Miss. Michael eventually became a top draft pick for the Baltimore Ravens after graduating from college.

Here is yet another icon. Paul and Silas after freeing the slave girl from her owners found themselves in prison. Instead of being discouraged in this Godforsaken place, Paul and Silas began to earnestly pray and sing. And as they prayed and sang to the prisoners, there was a mighty earthquake which broken open the doors of the prison. The earthquake was so violent that the foundation of the prison began to shake, all the doors to the prison were broken open. The prayers and the music unleashed Paul and Silas from their imprisonment along with the other prisoners.

As I thought about how Paul and Silas sang themselves out of prison, I thought of an icon from the movie "Girls in the Band." Set in the 1930's the film tells how women jazz musicians sought to break into the good old boys club of jazz musicians where they too could use their musical gifts. Jazz bands offered to women not encouragement but an intense male chauvinism. And yet in spite of great odds, these women sang and played their way out of the prison they were living in. For these musicians they got their strength from somewhere. And the children of all these mothers surely drew inspiration from their mom's courage to be strong, shake the foundations, and open wide the doors which has been shut closed with their music which were slammed closed.

One more picture comes to us from the book of Acts. After Paul and Silas had sang and prayed so loud and an earthquake had broken open the prison doors, the jailer was so scared because all these prisoners were being set free. He was no ashamed that under his watch that such a thing could happen, that he threatened to kill himself. But Paul and Silas begged the jailer not to do so but instead invited him to give his life to Christ. The jailer at that moment accepted Christ into his heart and then had himself and his whole family baptized with out delay.

This story leads me to offer a final image of Olivier Enwa. At the age of 9 he stands before to say that he wants to follow Jesus. Enwa, his Dad, raised Olivier. His mom surely would have wanted to be here but she died in the Congo a few years back so he was raised by his Dad alone.

Lucy Samara and others in this church have also offered Olivier some mothering and nurture in the way his mother would have wanted to should she be alive. In many respects, all of us as a family have made a promise to raise him in the Christian faith. But while we are here to offer our care, we are also moved by Olivier's maturity and Christian witness to all of us. Olivier reminds us that what we do here is serious, joy filled and life giving matter. He reminds us that

all of us have a responsibility to help people grow in their faith and that they are not on their own. We are mothers to each other and can offer great nurture.

On this mother's day, which images out of your own lives give you perspective, purpose, and hope? Much like those prison doors broke open, may the doors of your own hearts open wide that you be strong and live by God's amazing love, forgiveness and grace. Amen.