

A Mother’s Day Prayer

“O God, this day we gather with eager hearts, hungry for You, yearning for the joy you promise in love. O God, together we hold a vision of your kingdom, a people of prayer and open hearts, a loving community eager to learn and eager to share. Thank you for blessing us, O God, and shining upon us with the mercy of your salvation.

On this day of celebrating your love, we lift to you those who have given us life, those who have loved us, those who have blessed us, and those who have taught us - all women, particularly our mothers. May your blessing pour out upon the woman who gave us birth, and those beautiful, strong women of faith who have been mothers to us along our journey.

We praise you, O God, for your gift of motherly love, both gentle and fierce, strong and humble, kind and true. We give our grateful praise, for you have provided loving hands that have worked so hard in raising us, cared enough to correct us, blessed us in ways we don’t fully understand as children.

We call forth your compassion upon every mother who has unknowingly caused pain and suffering. We lift to you our mothers, so imperfect, also wounded by this world.

We bless our mothers this day, no matter what they have done or left undone. We do this because we believe in your healing, and we believe in your love and we believe that you love every mother, good or bad; and we stand together with all women in solidarity, for we all are in need of your grace. Where we have failed because we did not know better, help us to forgive ourselves. Where we have seen your face in any woman who has been to us a mother, in her face we have seen your light and your love and we give thanks - for where they have loved, they have kept your word and blessed us.

We lift to you the heart of every mother who has watched her child die of hunger, every woman who had been a victim of abuse, every woman who stands in protest against a world that, through action or inaction, allows children to die without hope. We lift to you the prayer of every mother who has ever loved and lost.

We lift to you our Mother Earth. We lift to you our Mother Church. We praise, O God, your mother's heart; and although we cannot fully express our gratitude, help each one of us to be your blessing of love, a blessing straight from your heart. Amen.”¹

¹ <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/mothers-day-prayer-a-21st-century-worship-resource>

Message: Tough Love

I want to share a story about grace.

Shawnelle Eliassen says, “When I look back, I understand that I’d been awful to my mother all afternoon. What had happened that day was misplaced anger. She’d taken all the hurt and frustration of her day and hurled them at her Mom.

By teenage standards, it had been a brutal day. Her best friend ditched her at lunch to hang with a cool kid. In P.E. class, they were lined up and forced to square dance with a member of the opposite sex. Her assigned partner balked at her nervous, wet palms and, for the rest of the morning, called her ‘Trout.’ They had a history test, and though she’d studied, her memory was empty on the French and Indian War.

And she had to ride the bus home. Perfectly terrible. Every bit of it.

‘Hey, how was your day?’ called her Mom as she walked through the front door and dropped her backpack. Her Mom smiled and went back to tying her little sister’s shoe. ‘There are cookies on the counter.’

Shawnelle sulked her way to the kitchen to find peanut butter cookies, the kind that are crisscrossed with the tines of a fork.

‘Gosh, Mom,’ she’d said. ‘Couldn’t you have made chocolate chip?’

Later at dinner, when Mom pulled baked chicken from the oven, she’d complained. Dad was working the 3-to-11 shift, and sometimes when he worked they had something simple like pizza. ‘Chicken and vegetables! Why can’t we ever have anything good?’

Her surliness continued. Mom had been patient. Kind. But by the time bedtime rolled around, they had a shouting match in the hall.

‘I think you’d better get to bed,’ Mom said. ‘You can start again tomorrow. But I’m telling you, I’ll be talking with your father tonight.’

Shawnelle trounced off, bare feet slapping the floor, and flopped on her bed. After a long while, she slipped under the covers, but couldn’t sleep. Something unexpected met her in the darkness.

Regret. Sorrow. Sadness.

She thought, 'Why did I treat Mom like that? If I'd only been willing to share, she would've pulled a chair up, looked into my eyes and listened. But instead I've let her become my verbal punching bag.'

Sleep didn't come, and somewhere near midnight she heard a creak in the hallway. Was it Dad coming to talk to her? Remorse brought a gentle flow of tears. She wiped them away in the dark, but before long the door opened and her room was filled with soft light.

It was Mom.

Mom sat on the bed and leaned close. 'Why don't you come down to the kitchen?' she said. Her voice was a whisper. Shawnelle pulled her robe from the back of the chair and followed Mom down the long hall. And what she found in the kitchen is something she'll never forget.

A table for two.

Two burgers sizzled on the griddle, newly covered with thick slices of cheese. Two milkshakes in tall, frosty glasses. Shawnelle stood, amazed, while Mom pulled a cookie sheet of fries from the oven.

She deserved a consequence, a punishment. Mom met her with grace. Shawnelle said, 'I'm so sorry. Please forgive me.'

'I will,' said her Mom. 'I love you. I understand what it's like to be in between a woman and a girl. It can be a tough place.' Her Mom held her close. She cried. After a few minutes, they sat down. The two talked half the night, sharing cheeseburgers, sharing fries, and sharing hearts.

Shawnelle didn't know when she'd experienced such love. She says, 'When I think back, I can still remember the quiet of darkness broken by our voices, the delicious goodness of having my Mom all to myself, the way her eyes met mine with compassion and forgiveness.'

I don't think there's a thing in the world like the capacity of a parent to love a child. Does it remind you, a little, of the Lord's kind of love?"²

Clearly, Shawnelle's Mom loved her children. She didn't let their anxieties become hers and she remained emotionally available, even after a disagreement. She knew it was important to be present for them.

² <https://www.guideposts.org/print/friends-and-family/family/a-mothers-grace>

That mother gave a gift that was much more than burgers, fries and a milkshake. She gave a gift of grace out of her love for her child, with no idea of the impact it would have. God knew. God knew who needed a sign. The two women were willing to stay together in love. That’s a good lesson for all of us on Mother’s Day.

Being a parent isn’t an easy job these days. There are so many ways our culture wants to grab our attention. There are so many demands on our time. It’s hard to balance work, family, school, church and all of the other activities of life. And that’s the case *if* everyone is behaving well. When our loved ones do things that hurt themselves, others and us, life gets much more challenging.

Most of us have heard the phrase ‘tough love.’ It was probably coined by Bill Milliken in his book Tough Love. It usually refers to the last-ditch efforts of people to force behavioral change. For example, it has been used to describe parents who, out of love, refuse to support their addicted child unless he or she enters a rehabilitation clinic. It can also be used to describe the techniques of those who impose specific rules and maintain strict lifestyles in order to train others.

In the 3rd chapter of 1st John, the author teaches us about tough love: *‘... let’s not love with words or speech but with action and truth. This is how we will know that we belong to the truth and reassure our hearts in God’s presence. Even if our hearts condemn us, God is greater than our hearts and knows all things. Dear friends, if our hearts don’t condemn us, we have confidence in relationship to God. We receive whatever we ask from him because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him. This is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and love each other as he commanded us (vv18-22 CEB).’*

Jesus understood tough love. He used it with his disciples, with the temple authorities and with the political leaders of his day. It wasn’t a theory or strategy or process. It was from a heart aligned to God.

It’s the new reality. It’s the way to a life lived fully and wholly.

Jesus didn’t surrender to the authorities to be put to death out of ulterior motives or desperation. He did it out of love for us. Jesus did it because it was what was needed to free us from the things that trap us.

For me, it’s an example of the toughest kind of love. It’s tough because Jesus didn’t hesitate in the face of death. It’s tough because what Jesus did has withstood the test of time with his followers and detractors. I’m not just talking about his death on the cross, but beyond the moment of rejection ... beyond the grave ... beyond the challenges of each generation down to today and into the future. It’s tough, because Jesus demonstrated the power of love, not only by giving up his life, but by willingly surrendering himself.

That may sound repetitive, but giving up his life and surrendering himself are both acts of love. Long before he gave himself over to death, Jesus was already giving up his life to everyone who needed him.

Who did Jesus give his life to? He gave it to:

- Anyone in trouble, hurting, lonely, scared, abused, broken, filled with grief, rejected by society, impoverished, imprisoned, unable to see, unable to walk, those who are ill, or those who are dying.
- Those who need his words of comfort and wisdom.
- Those lost in the crowd who need healing, particularly for their spirit.
- Anyone who needs his time and attention.

Jesus gave his life to whoever was in need. He gave his life to his friends. Jesus gave his life to those he met each day of his life, to strangers, the needy and the lost. Jesus gave his life to those who, when they found themselves down and depressed, were renewed by the power of his joy, grace and presence. Jesus can always be counted on to strengthen our faith and give the hope we need to keep going.

Jesus calls us to live the same way. We’re called to love sacrificially.

Love responds to suffering and hurt. Being present and giving sacrificially is how Jesus shows love. That’s what it means when we talk about *the love of Christ*. It’s the stewardship of presence. Godly love isn’t just the easy stuff. Being present isn’t just coming to church, shaking hands on Sunday, singing, prayer and programs for children.

To love as Christ loved means we’re to engage ourselves fully in the really difficult, tough stuff of life. We’re to be present – physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually.

Why? Because it’s the way Jesus lived and died, and it’s the way he calls us to live. It’s not just a matter of idealistic or simplistic thinking, or something we strive for. It’s a *critical action*.

When love goes from thought to attitude to action, it lives in our heart, not our mind. And that’s what we need to survive and thrive. After all, the message of the world is “everyone for themselves” – a narcissistic, fatalist view of life. It’s the view from the top of the pyramid. It’s the view of a predator: everything exists for their comfort, entertainment or consumption. Life is more than consumption.

Christ’s way of loving gives meaning to all of creation. Life in Christ is only possible when we put Jesus first, when we seek to experience God’s presence and grace. This God-first view runs counter to the normal me-first view. It calls us to change, putting other’s needs first. A God-first view is a love-first view. And love has the power to change the world. It’s what gives us hope. It’s just as radical today as it was when Jesus first showed us the way.

Love-first is the source of maternal instinct, mother’s love.

“Love-first is source of marriage, family and the community of faith. Love-first is the source of forgiveness, redemption and salvation. Love-first is the gift of God. It’s the essence of what it means to love one another as Christ loved us. Love isn’t a feeling. Love is an action. It’s the act of self-giving, without expecting a return. As we remember our mother and those who have sacrificed themselves for us today, let’s remember the one who made the ultimate sacrifice to give us true life, a life of love.”³

Jesus is what true love looks like. True love is very, very tough. True love is strongest when we’re at our weakest. True love is tougher, even, than death. Keep that in mind when things are at their darkest. Jesus’ love conquered death to open a doorway to eternal life in heaven. Let’s remain in love with Jesus. When we do, we’ll be amazed at what can happen. It might even involve burgers, fries and a milkshake.

³ <http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship/lectionary-calendar/sixth-sunday-of-easter4#notes1>

1 John 3:18-24 (NRSV)

Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.

And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.