

A Mother's Deep Prayer

John 17:20-26

Tina Fey, the actress and comedienne who has made a career of *Saturday Night Live*, *30 Rock*, and parodying Sarah Palin, published her memoir a couple of years ago titled, *Bossypants*. In it, she mused about her pregnancy at the time and her expectations of motherhood, including a prayer she wrote for her soon-to-be-born daughter, Penelope. Though, there are elements of it that are slightly off-color (especially relayed from the pulpit!), bear with me and I'll try to edit them as much as I can, and leave it to you to find the unedited version. In any case, enjoy this mother's delightful prayer:

First, Lord: No tattoos. May neither Chinese symbol for truth nor Winnie-the-Pooh holding the FSU logo stain her tender haunches.

May she be Beautiful but not Damaged, for it's the Damage that draws the creepy soccer coach's eye, not the Beauty.

When the Crystal Meth is offered, may she remember the parents who cut her grapes in half, and stick with Beer.

Guide her, protect her when crossing the street, stepping onto boats, swimming in the ocean, swimming in pools, walking near pools, standing on the nearby subway platform, crossing 86th Street, stepping off of boats, using mall restrooms, getting on and off escalators, driving on country roads while arguing, leaning on large windows, walking in parking lots, riding Ferris wheels, roller-coasters, log flumes, or anything called "Hell Drop," "Tower of Torture," or "The Death Spiral Rock N' Zero G Roll featuring Aerosmith," and standing on any kind of balcony ever, anywhere, at any age.

Lead her away from Acting but not all the way to Finance.

Something where she can make her own hours but still feel intellectually fulfilled and get outside sometimes

And not have to wear high heels.

What would that be, Lord? Architecture? Midwifery? Golf course design?
I'm asking You because if I knew, I'd be doing it, ...

May she play the Drums to the fiery rhythm of her Own Heart with the
sinewy strength of her Own Arms, so she need Not Lie With Drummers.

Grant her a Rough Patch from twelve to seventeen.

Let her draw horses and be interested in Barbies for much too long, for
Childhood is short — a Tiger Flower blooming magenta for one day — and
Adulthood is long and [cavorting] in Cars will wait.

O Lord, break the Internet forever, that she may be spared the misspelled
invective of her peers and the online marketing campaign for Rape Hostel
V: Girls Just Wanna Get Stabbed.

And when she one day turns on me and calls me a [witch] in front of
Hollister, give me the strength, Lord, to yank her directly into a cab in
front of her friends,

For I will not have that [crap]. I will not have it.

And should she choose to be a Mother one day, be my eyes, Lord, that I
may see her, lying on a blanket on the floor at 4:50 a.m., all-at-once
exhausted, bored, and in love with the little creature whose poop is leaking
up its back.

“My mother did this for me once,” she will realize as she cleans feces off
her baby's neck.

“My mother did this for me.” And the delayed gratitude will wash over her
as it does each generation and she will make a Mental note to call me. And
she will forget.

But I'll know, because I peeped it with Your God eyes.

Amen.¹

Now this isn't quite like the Hallmark card you sent or received
this morning, but I can well imagine that the appeal of Tina Fey's
prayer is that it is candidly honest, amusing, and quite true to the way
most mothers feel about the audacious responsibility of bringing up a

¹ Tina Fey, *Bossypants*, Little, Brown & Co., 2011.

child in today's culture. There are a lot of unnerving influences upon our children and youth, much different from the "Leave It to Beaver" days when most of us grew up—influences that probably scare the heejeebers out of many young parents. For that very reason, we may never experience another Baby Boom in this country!

Worries aside, there is something moving and powerful about the depth of a mother's concern and love for her child. With few exceptions, human love is rarely expressed more poignantly, unconditionally, and pure than from a mother to her children. Not to exclude all others, but there is a primal connection to a mother that is hard to surpass. As author Mitch Albom phrased it in his book, *For One More Day*,

...[B]ehind all your stories is always your mother's story, because here is where your story begins. ...When you look in your mother's eyes, you know that is the purest love you can find on this earth. ²

This isn't to say that each family is the same, or that this reflects every mother's bond to her children, but it is far more common for a mother to be integral to her children's lives than any other person. For most, mom is the one who has known and cared for you longer than anyone else.

However, it's also likely that one's ties to a mother, or a mother's to her child, is one of the most complex and emotionally charged relationships ever experienced in life. Therapists pay off their mortgages by counseling clients through all of their "mother" issues! There's usually plenty of drama in a mother-child relationship: conflicting demands and unspoken expectations often result in a mix of emotions and simmering tensions. Unlike many

² Mitch Albom, *For One More Day*, Hyperion, 2006.

fathers who can conveniently remain aloof to household histrionics and provocations, mothers are often in the trenches through most of life's battles. Thus, there's a push/pull between embracing each other and keeping a distance to regain one's sanity.

Part of the drama is due to the evolving relationship. The dependence/autonomy quotient between a mother and child varies greatly from one stage of life to another. As Developmental and Attachment Theory psychologists argue, children need their mother, or at least the nurturing of a mother-like figure. A mother's nurturing at an early age is what positively influences the cognitive and emotional development at a later age, providing the "external structure" for a child to acquire the competencies to manage on their own. Motherly nurturing is what helps provide identity, a sense of security, and emotional control. However, as children mature and seek autonomy, a mother's attachment to her child often becomes overbearing, smothering or demanding because they are less inclined to let their children go which, of course, produces a resulting friction and upset. Hence, the mother you love dearly is often the one who later becomes the target of youthful scorn and resentment.

That said, to be without this primal relationship of love between mother and child is more destabilizing and difficult than it might appear. One of the things I've observed over the years is how different the emotions are for people when they leave the care of their mother as a teen or young adult compared to when they permanently lose the presence of their mother, usually through death. The sense of loss in the latter is quite acute and deeply felt.

When you're in your teens or early twenties, the focus is primarily on yourself and your own freedom, with a knowledge that your mother remains behind at home for you to call upon (at your convenience, of course). However, when it's your mother who leaves *you* through death, aside from the loss is an underlying sense of abandonment and vulnerability—primal emotions felt deeply, perhaps unlike any other life transition. It's not unusual for sons and daughters to grieve the passing of their mothers more than anyone else. The intensity of emotion is over losing an integral—even organic—part of your life, your identity, and your sense of security and wellbeing that has been a part of your earliest memories—the person, in all likelihood, you've known for the entirety of your life. The grief of losing a mother is usually only surpassed by the sorrow a mother feels over losing her child, whose entire life she has carried in her heart.

The beauty and complications of a nurturing relationship leave their mark on most people's lives and usually compose the thoughts and feelings we have about human love. What's interesting to me are the parallels that exist with the deep feelings Jesus had over his disciples expressed during the closing hours of his life as revealed by our text for today. If we can get beyond the masculine nature of these relationships and the patriarchal references to God, I see Jesus' emotional and spiritual concern for the wellbeing and future of his closest followers similar to a mother's prayer for her children.

The text is part of a longer farewell passage encompassing several chapters in John that was set in the context of Maundy Thursday, the evening before the crucifixion. On that night, John

draws out a controlled fortitude in Jesus, in contrast to the other Gospel writers who portrayed Jesus as praying in anguish and sorrow in the garden facing the prospects of his imminent death. John doesn't dramatize the Garden of Gethsemane, but instead depicts Jesus forthrightly preparing his disciples for the eventual transition, particularly when they would be on their own.

What is striking is that Jesus doesn't appear to worry about whether the disciples will understand what has or will take place. His concern here is his followers getting along and being inspired by the same selfless love and sacrificial spirit that Jesus expressed and God revealed. It's not just Jesus' concern. What we're also hearing is the voice of John who, decades later, saw the divisions and complexities of the early Christian communities, often rivaling each other over who was reflecting the truth of the Gospel. True to families, communities, and churches, the disciples' own ambitions, rivalries, disagreements, hurtful actions and comments, and long painful memories undermined the mission of the church and drained kindred relationships of their love and acceptance.

The parallels to family life were not coincidental. To a mother, a father, an elder, a leader—to the one whose vision, commitment, and love brought lives together in family-like relationships—division and separation undermines everything for which they have worked and sacrificed. What is sought isn't an imposed uniformity intended to rob anyone of their gifts, opinions, and personal distinction, instead it is a *unity of spirit*—recognizing and appreciating their individual differences but emphasizing the ties that bind them together. Love one another as I have loved you.

When human beings are bound together by a nurturing love that will not let them go, then it is their duty—their responsibility—to value and respect that love in such a way that it will be reflected in them as well, regardless of the complexities and histories of the relationships. For John, the realization for the early church was that their expressed love for one another is where Jesus was honored and God was glorified—in their family unity, not in the correctness of their individual beliefs or the purity of their personal practices.

This is a point reaffirmed in several passages of John’s Gospel, as well as in the epistles that were ascribed to John’s community. By their unity, by their love, the testimony of Jesus would become believable and worthy of acceptance by those around them. That was, in effect, John’s version of the Great Commission: as Jesus had made God’s love known to the disciples, so the disciples would make it known to others, verified by their own unity and care for one another.

In many ways, this is a mother-like manifesto: children, may you reflect the love I have for you by loving one another and keeping the family bonds strong and enduring. That is a mother’s deep prayer for her offspring—that they may find their way through life—through its turmoil, challenges, and setbacks—through its advances, opportunities and accomplishments—with the ties that bind them to each other and to the primal love of their lives—that ultimately, it is a family bond of love that continues to nurture them and nourish their hearts and souls. The wisest families do this, putting aside sibling rivalries and resentments over the past in order to express in a genuine way, a love that was shown to them offered to another, as unconditionally, as generous, as sacrificial, and as resilient as possible

to the forces that try to tear them apart and leave them impoverished of a familial love.

Isn't that the main inheritance of good and loving parents, from one generation to another? Isn't this a mother's deep prayer? "My children, love one another and carry each other in your hearts as you have been carried in mine." Somehow, we find a way to value our mother's love, regardless of how consistent or how well that love has been expressed over the years, or how it has been reciprocated. It still is a cherished part of life, from cradle to grave, because it is the first love, the primal love, of our lives.

Barbara Kingsolver, the *New York Times* best-selling author, once wrote: "The strength of motherhood is greater than natural laws." Perhaps that's why, as human beings, born from our mothers' wombs, we are spiritually bereft without it. At its best, it is almost supernatural—divinely revealing and divinely blessed. When it is fully known and well expressed, such love is like embracing the heart and spirit of God.

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