

Sermon

May 14, 2017 | The 5th Sunday of Easter
Text: 1 Peter 2:2-10 | Preacher: Dan Puchalla

To all you mothers, to aspiring mothers and those for whom motherhood has been a frustrated dream, to adopted mothers and adoptive mothers, to step-mothers, to spiritual mothers, to all of you who couldn't restrain themselves from mothering me these past years – you know who you are – and to all women who care for, mentor, and lead those around you, accept my thanksgivings and my prayers for your happiness this Mother's Day.

Pope Francis beat me by a week in his Mother's Day felicitations, when he defended the honor of mothers everywhere last Saturday. Speaking to an assemblage of seminarians at the Vatican, Francis talked about the United States' recent use of the most destructive non-nuclear bomb in our arsenal to attack a system of ISIS tunnels in Afghanistan. That bomb goes by the acronym MOAB, which officially stands for Massive Ordnance Air Blast but which colloquially stands for Mother Of All Bombs.

The Pope said of this bomb, "I was ashamed when I heard the name. A mother gives life and this one gives death, and we call this device a mother. What is going on?"*

I suspect Francis is correct that this nickname is an insult to mothers everywhere, though I should let the mothers of the world have the final word on that. Of greater insult, certainly, is the interminable warfare in which MOAB was deployed – a war which has fixed itself as a constant of our times, while thousands of lives and limbs born by thousands of mothers continue to be subtracted in the opaque calculus of national security. I hope and trust this will be the criticism the Pope will deliver to the President when he visits the Vatican later this month.

Even so, I wonder if Francis' ideas about motherhood are too simplistic, too clear-cut, his boundaries around what counts as motherhood too well fortified. Growing up as a child in the Roman Catholic Church, I remember silent, stony statues of the Blessed Mother looming large over CCD classrooms, side chapels, and even from atop the mustard-colored refrigerator in my family's kitchen. Mary's gentle countenance, flowery crown, and flowing blue robes were a heavenly vision of pure life-giver, a motherhood unblemished by the messiness of sex and childbirth and parenting, a mother who could never be compared with a bomb.

But then again, neither could this Blessed Mother ever be compared with that Semitic peasant woman in Luke's gospel who sings of God scattering the proud and throwing down the kings of

the earth. Worse still, the Blessed Mother could never be compared with any living, human mother.

To my understanding, there are plenty of times when motherhood can be compared with a bomb being dropped. There are times when mothers have to bring a little fire to their children. I know that was true for me. I have never been a morning person and as a kid I could have slept right through the end of the world. My mom, though, had a special talent for waking me up. She could modulate her voice to such a shrill frequency and volume as to make me bolt up in bed. Every morning was an air raid, which is exactly what I needed to get to school. Sometimes good parenting feels like a bomb being dropped on us.

And there are times when mothers simply come to the end of their tether, or when stress in a domestic partnerships comes to a flashpoint, or when it's just one of those days and suddenly mom explodes a little bit. Sometimes human parenting feels like a bomb being dropped on us.

And then there are the times of disease, diminishment, and death, when the one who gave you life loses hers. Sometimes, the loss of a parent feels like a bomb being dropped on us.

But there are also times when motherhood is completely divorced from life-giving. Perhaps because of addiction or mental illness, some mothers take more life than they can give. Those fortunate enough to have mothers they can celebrate today should give thanks for them while also remembering those for whom this day recalls memories of pain and destruction. Sometimes, parents are bombs.

The point is that motherhood is complicated, to say the least. So, let all you loving mothers show grace to yourselves, and let all you who can love your mothers love them as the complicated human beings that they are. I, for one, would like to put away the stony statue of the Blessed Mother and honor the messy humanness of actual living mothers.

Today's second reading from a letter attributed to St. Peter shares at least an ambivalence for stones if not a prejudice against them. I think it's providential that we read this letter today, when we celebrate not only Mother's Day but also the start of our building project, for which we've spent the better part of two years preparing. On such an occasion, one normally has a groundbreaking ceremony, but there's really no ground we have to break for this project. There is, however, plenty of demolition to do,

plenty of stones to break – or, more precisely, plenty of concrete. At the end of this service, we will go out to those front doors and take a sledgehammer to our old and crumbling front steps in order to make way for a new and more welcoming entrance into these walls, a symbolic start to all the other demolition and construction we will do over the next several months to make this place more hospitable, accessible, renewed, and sustainable.

I think it's providential we read from 1 Peter today because the author of this letter has a caveat for us. As this exciting building project begins, the author of this letter urges us not to forget who we are. "Like living stones," the author writes, "let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." Just as motherhood cannot be reduced to a stony statue, so can the church not be reduced to the stones of its buildings. These stones and brick and timbers are our house, our commons, our workspace, and our sanctuary – but they are not the church. *We* are the church, each of us a living stone out of which Christ builds the only church God truly cares to attend: a temple built of stones mortared with love and plumbed with justice, a temple built of living stones, built of the messy, complicated reality of people trying to live together as one body, which is what, when the dust settles, this parish is all about.

We are nothing if not complicated. We are a temple built from hurt and forgiveness, from loneliness and new friendship, from skepticism and faithfulness, from despair and a strange inscrutable hope. It's the messiness of our shared living-together that makes this building holy because that is what is acceptable to God. So, later this year when the dust does settle and the paint has dried, may this continue to be a place in which we can confidently offer such spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God, but may this temple also be built of living stones who are rejected by mortals yet precious in God's sight, and most of all may the light of the love we know in this place explode through the fortified walls of hatred and violence into which so many in this world even now are seeking refuge from the complicatedness of this life. Amen.

*<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-39830311>