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## *Mother's Day: Here's to the Ministry of Changing Gracefully*

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**A Sermon at The Cathedral of St. Philip**  
**Atlanta, Georgia**  
**Easter 5B**  
**10 May 2009**

Jesus said "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower.  
He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit.  
Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit."  
-John 15:1-2

A graceful and gracious Mother's Day to you today! We give thanks today for the ministry of mothers wherever they may be and of whatever sort they are. They are natural mothers and adoptive mothers. Some are here today; some have died. They are grandmothers, great-grandmothers, and godmothers. Why, we even give thanks today for mothers-in-law!

At staff meetings this past week, as we were planning for this Sunday and remembering Mother's Day, someone asked the intriguing question: is Mother's Day in the United States the same thing as Mothering Sunday in the Church of England? Some of you from England, or who have visited England, may have happened upon church on "Mothering Sunday."

But, historically, they are not the same thing. The United States founder of Mother's Day, a woman named Anna Jarvis, apparently began the movement as a way for every person to honor specifically his or her own mother. The occasion quickly came to include the buying of flowers and cards, which apparently dismayed Anna Jarvis. She thought it outrageous that someone would buy a card for their mother which included lines written by someone else. She wanted sons and daughters to write their own lines, to do their own thing!

Mothering Sunday, on the other hand, is an English occasion almost five hundred years old, on which one remembers, not one's own earthly mother, but the church, as mother. On Mothering Sunday, people returned to their home church -either the large, local one, or the cathedral itself -remembering that the church is "the mother of us all." It was always the Fourth Sunday of Lent, and the epistle lesson was always from Galatians 4:26, saying that "the Jerusalem which is above is free, and she is the mother of us all."

I know that people come to church for all sorts of reasons, and I realize that some of those reasons might be considered inappropriate - but not for me. I am never opposed to any sort of reason to come to church. So, today, I like both these reasons to come to church: to honor one's own mother, or to remember one's mother church.

It is a delightful coincidence today that our own church, the Cathedral of St. Philip, hears the epistle story of our own patron saint, the deacon Saint Philip. This is our story, and we are hearing it on Mother's Day. Here in Acts, chapter eight, we hear how St. Philip left his comfortable home in Jerusalem, ventured down a wilderness road, and was led to teach and to baptize a foreigner - and not just any foreigner, but one who was strangely blemished. Philip shows us that God cares for

all of creation! I love lifting up this story of Philip on a day when people come back to the Cathedral of St. Philip. Here at the Cathedral, we learn to follow the service and the evangelism of Philip. We learn to leave our places of comfort; we learn to teach, to baptize, and to engage the stranger. This is the Christian life.

No matter where else we have been lately, when we return to church, we re-learn the basics of Christian love and service. You and I both know what else happens when we return to church after an absence. We may see some things that are the same. But what we notice predominantly is that things have changed! When we go back to church, it is disappointment that challenges us. What happened to our old community? Why is the preacher different? What happened to my old classroom? Why do they say different prayers now?

Some of that change is inevitable, and most of it is for the better. But some of the changes were clearly mistakes. And some, whether intentional or not, have not been helpful at all.

For me, the same sort of bittersweet experience occurs when I return to my childhood home. I love seeing the things that are the same. But what I notice predominantly are the changes. Why did they re-decorate that room? Where did my old bedroom go? Why is there a garden where I used to play in the sand? Why did life go on after I left my mother and my father?

Yes, life went on. And life consists not just of things that stay the same; life consists of things that change.

If there is one characteristic of mothers that I want to left up today, it would not be gentleness or kindness or some of the other, very lovely, fruits of the spirit. If there is one value of motherhood that needs recognition today, it is the ability of mothers to teach their children about change.

"To live is to change," said John Henry Newman, in the nineteenth century. "To live is to change," he said, "and to be perfect is to have changed much." Good mothers do not just teach one thing once, but they also teach the next thing after something has changed.

In fact, sometimes it is the role of good mothers to make things change. There were times we needed to be dropped off at school alone. And there were certainly times when we needed to change our behavior. Good mothers teach us how to change.

In the Bible, this change is called lots of things. One of the words for repentance is metanoia, which means to "change one's mind," or to "turn around." This is how we can think of the Christian Church as "mother," too. If the church is our mother, then we will learn about change in church, too. We will learn to change our behavior, and we -most critically- we will learn how to change gracefully.

Change in our lives does not change anything about the grace of God. In fact, the more we go through change in our own lives, the more we learn about the grace of God in our lives. Sometimes, we do not really know our true identity until we have changed a great deal.

I think all this is what Jesus had in mind when he spoke to his closest friends, during his last days, about change. He was about to undergo dramatic change - he was about to die- and he said to his disciples, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that does bear fruit, he prunes," (John 15:1-2).

Pruning branches can hurt. Cutting off limbs from our growth can hurt. It makes us change. Being pruned is like waking up one morning and no longer having that ragged security blanket there. Being pruned is like having our mother scold us for inappropriate behavior. But those actions are some of the most important ministries that mothers have.

I salute today the ministry of mothers who know how to prune, who know how to cut away gracefully the old so that the new can spring forth. It is the ministry of gardening, and it is the ministry of Jesus himself. It is the ministry of our own earthly mothers, and it is the ministry of our mother the Church too.

It is the ministry of teaching us to change gracefully. When we learn to change, and when we have changed much -guided by a tender and caring mother""then we actually learn what our true identity is - what it is about ourselves that will never change.

So, a graceful and gracious Mother's Day to all of you -whether you are here with your own mother or child, or not. Whether you are an earthly mother or not. Here's to that most difficult, but most critical ministry of care that mothers and churches share: to prune away the old so that the new can spring forth. It is the ministry of Jesus himself, to show us how to change gracefully, and so grow into the kingdom of God.

AMEN.

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