

# “Love Like a Mother”

May 14, 2017  
Romans 16:1-16

Rev. Kimberly Heath  
Wall Street United Church



The scripture reading from Romans isn't the most interesting of Bible passages--it's a letter, after all, and Paul is sending greetings and thanks to people who have helped him in his ministry. These are the parts of the Bible that you skim or just plain skip over to get to the good stuff! But I was struck by this Romans passage. Six of the people Paul names are women.

Paul gets a bit of a bad rap on being a male chauvinist. He was certainly a product of his time when women had little status, particularly in synagogues and in religious life. Still there is no question that he valued the work and influence of women in the early church. There is no question that he is genuinely grateful for the work and support of women like Phoebe, a deacon in the early church, and like Priscilla and Aquila, "my fellow workers in Christ Jesus."

Today, because it's Mother's Day, I want to highlight verse 13: "*Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; and greet his mother—a mother to me also.*" Now we don't know anything about her. Frankly we don't really know who Rufus is. He might have been one of the sons of Simon of Cyrene—who ended up carrying the cross of Jesus. The Gospel of Mark tells us that Simon was the father of Alexander and Rufus. If so the woman who is like a mother to Paul was Simon of Cyrene's wife.

Whoever this woman was, she must have at some point cared for Paul or given him that strong, supportive love that he needed. She was not his mother, but was like a mother to him.

Thank God for mothers and thank God for people in our lives who are like a mother to us -- for people who love us like a mother.

What does it mean 'to love like a mother?' If you have internet take a look at this video. It's a commercial that went viral a few years ago. <https://youtu.be/XjJQBjWYDTs> Always: 'Run like a girl' video.

Now we know what it really means to run like a girl! What does it mean to 'love like a mother'?

On Mother's Day we sometimes get a little sentimental about that love and we certainly romanticize it. No mother is perfect, and it seems to me the love we all long for more of is the love of a mother. We need people in our lives who are like a mother to us.

Like you, I grew up with the dominant image of God being a Father. Jesus described God as his father and he called him Abba, or 'daddy'. So that is our primary image and it's a good one. It was radical in its time as it showed God not as distant, but as one who is in relationship with us. God is not some out-there-being who does not care. God is not one who created the earth and then walked away; but rather, God is one who knows us and loves us and provides for us and leads us. But you can't get too stuck in one image—the church has gotten a bit stuck on the image of God as father, and it gets warped into an image of a distant, aloof, sometimes cranky and punishing old man in the sky.

No image is perfect. God is Abba-father, God is the lion and the lamb, the beginning and the end. God is a king and a servant. God is so much more than we can comprehend and so any human image will never be enough. But a very good image for God is that of a mother.

There are numerous passages in the Bible where God is given the qualities of a mother.

Hosea 11:3-4 God described as a mother:

*God: "Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I who took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them."*

Isaiah 66:13 God as a comforting mother:

*God: "As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem."*

Matthew 23:37 and Luke 13:34 God as a Mother Hen:

*Jesus: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children*

*together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!"*

The truth is the image that Jesus gives is often closer to that of a mother than that of a father. But that image would not have worked in that time and culture.

Some are reluctant to use a mother as an image of God because they think ascribing qualities of a mother to God would weaken God. But God is love, and when we think of the fierce bond of love, the greatest image we have is that of a mother and a child.

When we would go hiking out west, my greatest fear was not that we would come across some hungry predator but that (without meaning to) we would get between a mother bear and her cubs. You don't want to get between a mother bear and her cubs!



A mother's love is not a weak love. It is more like the love that Paul described in 1 Corinthians 13: *"Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things, and love never ends."*

That is the kind of fierce, unconditional love that we all need so very much. Many are fortunate to have experienced some of that kind of love from their mothers, but because we are human, your mother isn't or wasn't perfect and you are not perfect in how you love either. That is why we need to look to God to provide that perfect love and to meet our great need for love. *Know that God's love for you is greater than any mother's love could be.*

I don't know what the apostle Paul's biological mother was like. She is never mentioned. I do know that Paul faced countless hardships from being flogged to being imprisoned. I do know that after he encountered the living Christ he travelled all over that Mediterranean region to share the gospel of Jesus. I know that most of the time he would have been far from any biological family that he had. My hunch is that there were probably days and nights when he could have sung that Negro Spiritual song...

This is Odetta, the singer who was known as "The voice of the civil rights movement". In this NY Times interview she was asked if there was one song she wanted to be remembered by and at first she said 'no' but then she said 'yes' -- and started to sing this song:

"Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child".

<https://youtu.be/Ce8ix4VGR2w?t=1m15s>

The song rang true for the slaves in the southern U.S. The children and youth of slaves were often taken from their families and sold off to other owners, and as a group, they suffered a deep feeling of separation from their homeland of Africa. The truth is at times we have all felt a long way from home. Whether our mother is living or has passed on ahead of us, we have all felt that loneliness and that emptiness of being a motherless child.

Paul was blessed to have a woman in his life whom he said was 'like a mother' to him. We all need people like that in our life and as Christians we are called to offer that love to one another. But Paul who also wrote the passage from 1 Corinthians was blessed even more to know the love of God.

St. Augustine of Hippo, one of the most influential writers in Christian history, often credited his mother for his conversion and his faith. His mother Monica prayed daily and unceasingly that her son would know the love of Jesus. Augustine said:

*"You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."*

When we feel far from home and when we long for that motherly love, ultimately we are longing for the love of God."

We are at our best when someone loves us like that, and the world is a better place when we can love like a mother. Whenever anyone loves you with a love that knows you and knows our faults and loves you anyway ... with a love that heals and forgives, that endures all things and hopes all things, you experience God's love.

Thank God for mothers. Thank God for people who are like a mother. Thank God most especially for His, for Her, deep and perfect love. Amen.

