

Richard Baker
 Westminster Presbyterian Church, Dayton OH
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Who From Our Mothers 'Arms: The Mother-Love of God

Thus says the Lord, As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you—Isaiah 66:12-13

Each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done.—Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy*

First Scripture Lesson: Isaiah Chapters 40, 42, 46, 49, and 66 (selected verses)

Our First Scripture Lesson is from the prophet Isaiah, Over and over again, in Isaiah, the people complain, "God has forgotten us, God has abandoned us." And over and over again, Isaiah reassures them: "God has not forgotten you. God's love for you is like a mother's love, never-ending and unending."

Love is not blind; love sees. Love sees more and more deeply, sees more of what is truly there. And like a mother, God sees us not for what we have done or failed to do, but for what we truly are, and always will be: beloved children.

Listen not for God Word from the later chapters of Isaiah:

*Why do you say, O Israel,
 "My way is hidden from the LORD,*

*Have you not known? Have you not heard?
 The LORD is the everlasting God,
 the Creator of the ends of the earth.
 He does not faint or grow weary;
 his understanding is unsearchable.*

*Thus says God, the LORD,
 who created the heavens and stretched them out,
 I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness,
 I have taken you by the hand and kept you;*

*Listen to me, O house of Israel,
 who have been borne by me from your birth,
 carried from the womb;
 I have made, and I will bear;
 I will carry and will save.*

*Israel said, "The LORD has forsaken me,
 my Lord has forgotten me."
 But the Lord answered: Can a woman forget her nursing child,
 or show no compassion for the child of her womb?
 Even these may forget,
 yet I will not forget you.*

*For thus says the LORD:
As a mother comforts her child,
so I will comfort you.*

Second Scripture Lesson: John 8:1-11

As Shelly Davies said during her Minute for Stewardship, in this stewardship season, we're focusing on the hymn, *Now Thank We All Our God*. Last week, we sang it together as a congregation; this week John will play it as the Concluding Voluntary.

And each week, we're focusing on a different line of the hymn. Last week, "Now thank we all our God with hearts and hands and voices." This week: "Now thank we all our God, who from our mother's arms has blessed us on our way." The passage I'm about to read from the Gospel of John, like the passages I read from Isaiah, is a fine example of God's mother-love. And if that doesn't seem obvious at first, I'll try to explain in the sermon. But for now, listen for God's Word:

Early in the morning Jesus came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them.

The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?"

They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him.

Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground.

When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground.

When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him.

Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, sir." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again."

Sermon

I should have expected it. That the house would be full (the auditorium roughly the size of the Schuster Center), that the crowd would be diverse (young and old, white and black, not just students and professors, but people from all walks of life), that the talk would be rousing (interrupted by frequent applause and numerous "Amens"), that at the end the crowd would respond with a long, sustained standing ovation—all *that* I expected. After all, this was Bryan Stevenson speaking. What I didn't expect were the t-shirts: people in the audience wearing black t-shirts, emblazoned with white lettering across the front: "Each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done."

And really I (of all people) should have expected it. Because as inspiring a speaker as Bryan Stevenson is, as good as his story is, as worthy his ministry is, it's the Gospel that drives him, that gives him life, and it's the Gospel that brings people out to hear him. And that sentence—the sentence that Stevenson uses to sum up his life's work and calling—that sentence, “Each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done”—that's Gospel.

Bryan Stevenson is a lawyer, whose life's work has been defending death-row prisoners. He's founder of the Equal Justice Initiative, a nonprofit that provides legal representation to people who have been illegally convicted, unfairly sentenced, or abused in state jails and prisons. The Equal Justice Initiative challenges the death penalty and excessive punishment and seeks to provide re-entry assistance to formerly incarcerated people.

Stevenson wrote a book about his work, called *Just Mercy* (it won the Dayton Literary Peace Prize in 2015). That book—or really one story from the book, the story of Walter “Johnny D.” McMillian—was made into a movie a few years back, also called *Just Mercy*, starring Michael B. Jordan and Jamie Foxx.

There's a reason the moviemakers chose McMillian's story: it was the one with a happy ending.

McMillian was a death-row inmate, one of many who asked Stevenson, begged him, to help appeal their cases. It wasn't long before Stevenson discovered that McMillan was not only the victim of an inept defense counsel, but also a corrupt and racist judicial process in which evidence was knowingly and illegally suppressed. McMillian was innocent—that soon became overwhelmingly clear; the challenge was to convince a court to actually hear the appeal, rather than simply dismiss it on procedural grounds. It took time, and during that time, Stevenson received death threats, and the Equal Justice Initiative, bomb threats, but eventually Stevenson prevailed: after six years, Walter McMillian walked out of prison a free man.

Jimmy Dill wasn't so lucky. He suffered from intellectual disabilities and had been sexually and physically abused throughout his childhood. He struggled with drug addiction, and in the course of a drug deal gone bad, shot a man. His victim did not die. In fact, he seemed to be well on his way to recovery, But nine months later, perhaps because of inadequate medical care, the man did die. Jimmy Dill was found guilty of capital murder, and sentenced to death by lethal injection.

Again, inept defense counsel: Dill's mental disabilities, his apparent lack of intent to kill, as well as the possibility of the victim's death resulting from poor medical care—all of that should have been introduced as mitigating evidence. None of it was. Again, Stevenson's challenge was to convince a court to actually hear the appeal, rather than simply dismiss it on procedural grounds. He kept trying, all the way up to the day of Jimmy Dill's scheduled execution, he kept trying; all the way to the United States Supreme Court, he kept trying. One hour before the execution was scheduled, Stevenson got the final word: the United States Supreme Court refused to grant a stay of execution. And now he had to call Jimmy to give him that word.

All Jimmy wanted to do was say thank you. But he couldn't get the words out. All his life, Jimmy had struggled with a severe speech impediment, a debilitating stutter that only got worse, when he was upset or afraid. And now, with the gurney in plain sight, with the noise and clatter of the guards preparing the room, with the state-appointed witnesses filing in, he just couldn't get the words out. So he and Mr. Bryan just stayed on the phone: no words, just the two of them, crying.

It was then that the incident from Bryan Stevenson's childhood, an incident long-forgotten, came back to him.

Bryan Stevenson grew up poor, in the country, on the so-called Eastern shore of Delaware, attending segregated schools. His mother, the formative influence in his life, played the organ at their church on Sundays.

One Sunday, when Bryan was ten years old, a boy about his age, a distant relation of another family, was visiting their church. A small, shy, skinny boy, he tried to talk, but couldn't, couldn't get the words out. All he could do was stammer. And Bryan, being a ten-year-old boy, laughed—laughed at him. In his book, Stevenson relates the incident this way:

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw my mother looking at me with an expression I'd never seen before. It was a mix of horror, anger, and shame, all focused on me.

When I got to her, she was very angry with me. "What are you doing?"

"What? I didn't do..."

"Don't you ever laugh at someone because they can't get their words out right. Don't you ever do that!"

"I'm sorry, "Mom, I didn't mean to do anything wrong."

"You should know better, Bryan."

"I'm sorry. I thought..."

"I don't want to hear it, Bryan. There is no excuse, and I'm very disappointed in you. Now, I want you to go back over there and tell that little boy that you're sorry."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Then I want you to give that little boy a hug."

"Huh?"

"Then I want you to tell him that you love him."

I looked up at her and, to my horror, saw that she was dead serious. I had reacted as apologetically as I possibly could, but this was way too much.

"Mom, I can't go over and tell that boy I love him. People will—" She gave me that look again.

And so he goes back to the boy, and in classic ten-year-old boy fashion:

"Look man I'm sorry."

And then he lunges at the boy with an exceedingly awkward hug, and trying to make it sound like a joke, says, "uh . . . also . . . uh, I love you."

And the boy hugging him back, whispers in his ear, flawlessly, without a stutter and without hesitation, “I love you too.”

The mother-love of God. That’s what that little boy gave to Bryan Stevenson that day. That’s what Bryan Stevenson’s mother gave him that day, and throughout her life. And that’s Bryan Stevenson gave to Jimmy Dill, and all his clients—the mother love of God. In the Old Testament, you can hear the mother-love of God in the words God speaks through the prophet Hosea:

*When Israel was a child, I loved him,
The more I called them,
the more they went from me;
yet it was I who taught them to walk,
I 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.*

*How can I give you up, O Israel?
How can I hand you over?
My heart recoils within me;
my compassion grows warm and tender.
I will not execute my fierce anger;
for I am God and no mortal,
the Holy One in your midst,
and I will not come in wrath.*

And in the New Testament, you can hear the mother-love of God in the words Jesus speaks to the woman, as the stones thud, one by one by one to the ground: “Neither do I condemn you, go and sin no more.

“Each of us is more than the worst thing we’ve ever done.”

Bryan Stevenson told that story, about Jimmy Dill and his mother just a few weeks ago, as Karen and I sat in the auditorium on the campus of Butler University.. We were sitting up in the mezzanine level, you know, where they have only three or four seats together on the side: you’re pretty high up, but looking almost right down on the stage. From there we could see the whole auditorium.

And I have to tell you at one point in Bryan Stevenson’s talk, I almost came out of my seat. It was when he was talking about the need to provide re-entry assistance to formerly incarcerated people; he said that too often we just push them out the prison door, giving them nothing more than what they had in their pockets when they came in. And he said that here was one place where churches could—and should—be doing more to help.

I tell you if Karen hadn't done that classic spouse-restraining maneuver, you know, the one where you put one hand on their leg and the other on their shoulder, and whisper, "Honey, *this* is not the time," I tell you if she hadn't done that, I would have been up on my feet:

"Excuse me, Mr. Stevenson, Bryan, yes, that's right over here, yes, up here, let me tell you about Westminster Presbyterian Church in Dayton Ohio, and our ID ministry, because we are doing something to help formerly incarcerated people re-enter society. In any given week, 40 to 70 percent of our clients are restored citizens."

As the Apostle Paul says, "If I boast, let me boast in the Lord."

But really I don't need to boast at all. For one thing our ID ministry has already been recognized. This year we've been selected to receive the 2021 Patricia Rousseau Community Advocacy Award as part of the Dayton Access to Justice Celebration

That's nice, but our ID ministry volunteers don't do it for recognition. One volunteer wrote this to me:

As I look back over the 10 years or so that I have been involved in the ID Ministry, I have been most profoundly touched by the stories that our clients willingly share. What they are seeking is a listening ear, a moment to share in celebration of their sobriety, their release from prison, their recovery from mental illness, or their challenges of homelessness. Once, I stood quietly in our sanctuary with one man, just released from prison, who simply asked to take a moment to stand in a church again . . . While our budget pays for the IDs that help our clients get on with their lives, the grace that we are blessed to share with these neighbors in need is our true mission.

That grace that volunteer spoke about, that grace that we share, our true mission, is the mother-love of God. Which why this church needs to be here and why we're asking for your support during this stewardship season: to share that love.

Near the end of their conversation that night, just minutes before the guards were to strap him to the gurney, Jimmy Dill finally got his words out:

"Mr. Bryan, I just want to thank you for fighting for me. I thank you for caring about me. I love y'all for trying to save me."

And as he sat there the phone in his hand and the tears rolling down his cheeks, Bryan Stevenson reflected, reflected and got angry:

I thought about all of his struggles and all the terrible things he'd gone through and how his disabilities had broken him. There was no excuse for him to have shot someone, but it didn't make sense to kill him. I began to get angry about it. Why do we want to kill all the broken people? What is wrong with us, that we think a thing like that can be right?

But with a little more reflection, he came to a deeper conclusion. He writes:

We are all broken by something. We have all hurt someone and have been hurt. We all share the condition of brokenness even if our brokenness is not equivalent. I desperately wanted mercy for Jimmy Dill and would have done anything to create justice for him, but I couldn't

pretend that his struggle was disconnected from my own. The ways in which I have been hurt—and have hurt others—are different from the ways Jimmy Dill suffered and caused suffering. But our shared brokenness connected us.

And so late into the night, hours after he had hung up the phone, Bryan Stevenson realized that he—that we, all of us, because of our shared brokenness, face a choice. He writes:

We have a choice. We can embrace our humanness, which means embracing our broken natures and the compassion that remains our best hope for healing. Or we can deny our brokenness, forswear compassion, and, as a result, deny our own humanity.

In Jesus Christ, God embraced our humanness; in Jesus Christ, God embraced our broken natures. That compassion is our best hope for healing. That compassion is the mother-love of God. And that's Gospel.

Now Thank We All Our God. Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.