

First Unitarian Universalist Church
May 13, 2007
Rev. Sandra Fees
The Strength of Love



Today on Mother's Day, I think about my own mother, and I'll see her later this afternoon. I also think about the other people in my life who have in one way or another been a mother to me in a positive and nurturing way, people like my grandmothers and aunts. I think about the ways that I have mothered, though I do not have children of my own.

I think especially of the special kind of love that mothers are called upon to offer. We want mothers to be soft and warm and nurturing. But we also want them to be strong enough to deal with anything. We want mothers who are brave and heroic and who also know how to make a mean piece. It's a lot to ask. I've come to realize a strong love has many expressions.

For one thing, we all know that mothers express the strength of their love by being protective. I think of Forrest Church who describes his mother as "a quintessential liberal." "My mother was what these days we call a codependent," he says. "I came home one year with three Cs and three Ds. She blamed my teacher."

Church also credits his mother with saving him from the bomb. When he was in school in 1958, the children had to do drills to be prepared in case of a nuclear attack. Church came up with his own plan. He practiced running home every day. One day, his mother learned of his plan, and even agreed.

She said, "If there ever were a nuclear attack, I'd want you here with me, not at school, under your stupid desk." So she contacted the principal, and the school created a new policy allowing certain children to be excused in the event of a nuclear attack.

There are times when a strong love means defending our children from harm, from the bomb. Julia Ward Howe knew this. She wanted women to arise. We heard it in her proclamation. She called on mothers to express the strength of their love by ensuring a safe and peaceful world for their children. Imagine if everyone – all men and women - would rise to the occasion. We could surely change the world for the better.

But strong love doesn't always look like that. Not every situation calls for us to arise in quite that way. Not every mother needs to storm in to save the day. There are times when love is best expressed by treading a bit more lightly.

I remember at the start of 4th grade, I got in with what my mother now calls "the wrong crowd." My teacher had called to let her know that I had become friends with other children she didn't think were right for me.

You see, and some of you might have guessed this about me, I was one of those children who didn't get into trouble. I got good grades, I was quiet, and I mostly did what my teachers asked me to do. I was pretty sheltered. My new friends were fun, but none of those other things.

The Strength of Love (cont'd.)

Rev. Sandra Fees

When my teacher called my mother, my mother didn't get upset. She explained to her that all my friends from third grade had been assigned to a different class. I was no longer in classes with those friends. The truth was, I was hanging around with other kids who accepted me into their group.

So my teacher, unbeknownst to me, helped me to make friends with some of the other kids in my class. And my mother, on the other hand, would ask me about how I was doing at school making new friends. She never told me who I could and couldn't be friends with. She didn't tell me that my teacher had called. She says she didn't want me to be self-conscious.

When she did tell me years later, I remember being upset about it. What gave my mother the right to judge my friends? How did she know who was right for me and who wasn't?

Well, I think we all know the reality that parents – both moms and dads – have to deal with situations like this one all the time. When I was a child it was mostly moms handling this kind of thing.

Sometimes the strength of love is expressed in dramatic, touching and unexpected ways. Ways we don't always think about like adoption. Lynn Ungar shares her own experience adopting a child.

She is white and adopted an African American child. So her daughter gets asked, "Is she your real mother?" a lot. Ungar says she is her real mother. But she has come to terms with the difficult idea that her daughter's birth mother is also her real mother. And that her birth mother made one of the toughest choices a mother has to make. As Ungar says,

Knowing that she wasn't going to be able to properly care for the baby growing inside her, D.D. made an adoption plan, so that her baby-to-be would have a family who was ready to do all the things that babies need. It was a huge, hard loving thing for D.D. to do, and doing huge, hard loving things is what being a mother is all about.

The strength of DD's love was not in holding on but in being able to let go. Learning the limitations of love takes its own kind of strength.

Donna Dudley, fiscal administrator at the Church of the Larger Fellowship, understands this. She knows what it's like to as she says be "flying solo" as a single mom.

She remembers realizing one night when she had gone to bed that if there was an emergency, there was no one to help her. If there were a fire, break in, or medical emergency, she would have to manage for her two children and herself. She came face to face with the stark realization that some things were beyond her control.

At that point, she decided on a new approach. After taking all reasonable precautions, including checking the smoke alarm batteries regularly, she says, "I decided to introduce a new strategy

The Strength of Love (cont'd.)

Rev. Sandra Fees

into my arsenal of parenting tricks. Something not entirely typical for me. Crossing my fingers. And so far so good! No fire, no break-ins, no medical emergencies.”

She isn't being flippant. She's trying to be realistic.

We can't safeguard each other from all of life's dangers and struggles. And sometimes the hardest thing is knowing this. It is possible and sometimes easier out of love to do too much or try to for our children and for others we love. We all know it can be painful and heartbreaking to watch the ones we care most about taking missteps and making mistakes.

Sometimes we try so hard to eliminate all the pain and peril of the world, which is of course simply not even remotely possible. And even if it were, we need to wonder how far to go to insulate our children from life's realities.

Think about chicks hatching from their eggs. About 25 percent just don't hatch at all. It isn't possible to help them do it either. We can keep them warm and provide the best possible environment. I love David Anderson's description of watching chicks breaking free of their shells.

It was fun watching the chicks peck, wriggle, and kick their way into this life. But then I'm not a chicken. It's much harder when one of your own is on the dark side of that shell. Then it can hurt. Then we want to reach out and help ... just a little. Our hearts actually get in the way; we forget that no one can break anyone else through. ([Breakfast Epiphanies](#))

Sometimes when a child says, "I want to do it myself!" the truer part of that is that they need to do it themselves. They need space to develop as a human being, to grow in character, to learn how to be who they are in the world.

Being protective. Taking a stand. Treading lightly. Letting go. Which is it? How are mothers – or any of us – to know which kind of love is called for? How do we know when it's time to storm in and take charge of a situation? When is it necessary to be patient and flexible? When is the time to cross our fingers and hope for the best? When do we let children break free of the shell themselves?

We all know mothers, in particular, are supposed to have eyes in the backs of their heads and special powers to figure this all out, right? And sometimes it really does seem that way. Sometimes. Even when we are adults, our mothers can seem to have an uncanny ability to know things we didn't think they knew.

But despite all our idealized greeting card notions, mothers are not perfect and never will be. Sometimes they really don't know what is called for and don't get it quite right. And perhaps in the end the greatest strength of their love is not that at all.

The Strength of Love (cont'd.)

Rev. Sandra Fees

It seems to me the real art of mothering, the real strength of a mother's love, is in their faithfulness. It has to do with their abiding in love. A faithful love has a sense of the divine about it. I always find there is a bit of mystery surrounding love.

It means remaining steadfast and loyal, despite it all. It means loving even when love seems impossible, when love will break your heart. It means giving a part of our hearts to another person regardless of whether that love is ever appreciated or returned. The strength of love is the ability to take a risk, to have faith that it's worth doing, faith that it's even worth failing at.

If we are lucky, we have known the strength of such love. One of the greatest gifts of my life has been the love of my mother, who has been faithful to me these 47 years.

May we cherish that kind of love wherever we experience it. And may we offer it wherever we can especially to those who need the strength of love.

May it be so. Amen.