



*Becky Ankeny*

I have been married to Mark since 1975; we have two daughters and three granddaughters, and we live with a variety of animals on a few acres near Newberg. I've been in teaching and administration at George Fox University since 1988, and have a Ph.D. from the University of Oregon and an MBA from the Oregon Executive MBA. I'm also a recorded minister in Northwest Yearly Meeting.

*BIBLE READING: Matthew 10:34-39*

This week of devotionals focuses on parent/child relationships in order to think about how God feels toward us. My purpose is to encourage trust in God's love and faithful commitment to us. So it seems odd, even to me, to start with this passage which teaches that we need to love Jesus more than we love parents or children, but remembering this will help us not to push the analogies too far.

The human truth is that unless we love Jesus most, we can't get the other loves right. We expect too much from the humans who parent us. We hunger for constant and reliable love; we need to come to Jesus to have that hunger satisfied.

Our love for our children can help us see part of God's love for us. God loves us like hens love chicks, bears love cubs, mommies love babies, eagles love eaglets. We need to check in with God, stay where God places us, share with God our aspirations and disappointments, and take risks when God invites us along.

Jesus taught us to place no barriers between "little ones" and God and to make it easy for them to trust in God. As parents of God's children, we need to believe that God's love for our children is bigger than ours. We need to encourage our children to love God more than they love us. The freedom of the gospel is for parents and children alike. The call to discipleship is for parents and children alike, also.

*SONG: Jesus, the Very Thought of Thee*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord Jesus, thank you for embodying God's love for me. I want to love you most, and I will need your help to make that true in my heart.*

—Becky Ankeny

*BIBLE READING: Isaiah 49:14-18*

It would be nice to idealize maternal love. But we can't. A mother can be strong and selfless *and* domineering and manipulative. A mother can in good faith make bad decisions. Human mothers are human. For instance, just suppose that I might have made mistakes. Someday my daughters may go to counselors to work through the ways what they needed and what I gave did not match up. This is so humbling.

And we read sad stories about mothers so distracted by their own needs and addictions that they literally or emotionally starve their children. And we know of mothers lacking the ability to see themselves as worthwhile who live entirely through their children, smothering them with what passes for love.

In Isaiah 49:15-16 (NRSV), the prophet says this for God, "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. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands."

Any nursing mother will tell you that it is downright painful to "forget" to nurse. God similarly needs to love us; otherwise, God will be in pain. Imagine that.

God has cut our names into God's own hand, like engraving stone or cutting into clay tablets. Jesus carries the evidence that God cannot forget us. We are never alone. I am not alone, whether as child, mother, grandmother, or just me. It is this self I am that God loves and longs to nurture.

*SONG: Precious Lord, Take My Hand*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Thank you, God, for your commitment to me, for your constant care. Open my eyes to your presence in my past and my present. Help me to trust you for my future.*

—Becky Ankeny

*BIBLE READING: Hosea 13:1-8*

When my daughter was old enough to drive, she attended a cast party after a play. We had arranged for her to come home by midnight. At 2 a.m., she wasn't home. I knew the parents who were hosting the party, and I called them. "She's here," they said, "asleep on the floor." I said, "Let her sleep. I was just worried she'd wrecked her car on the way home." (Inside, I had other fears as well, but I didn't elaborate. It was 2 a.m., after all.) I grounded my daughter for forgetting me (and she took it graciously).

What does a mother do when her children forget her and put themselves in danger? In Hosea 13:8, God responds to being forgotten and replaced with this warning: "I will fall on them like a bear robbed of her cubs, and will tear open the covering of their heart; there I will devour them like a lion, as a wild animal would mangle them" (NRSV). God cannot bear separation from the cubs, even if the cubs themselves run away (or don't phone home).

It's not that a mom is in the place of God (another idolatry, really), but that God feels like a mom whose children have been stolen. God protects like a mother bear. Sin steals God's children and encases their hearts, and God cannot bear the separation; God will stop at nothing to get the cubs back.

*SONG: Lord, I'm Coming Home*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Thank you, God, for stopping at nothing to get me home safe. Don't let me forget your love and commitment to my good and your goodness, which turn out to be the same thing. Help me to lean into your big love.*

—Becky Ankeny

*BIBLE READING: Luke 15:8-10*

I think I have spent over a whole week of my life and maybe more looking for lost earrings. I have spent additional time looking for lost keys. I have left my wallet at stores and spent anxious afternoons trying to find it.

I lost my preschool daughter twice: once in a department store (she was playing hide and seek in the clothes racks), and once for a couple of hours when she wandered away from the house. My panic gave way to relief when the police car pulled into a neighbor's driveway as I stood outside asking for any sightings, and the officer said, "Has someone here lost a child?"

The picture of God as a woman who has lost a significant amount of money and wants to find it resonates with me. I recently swept, moved the furniture, swept again, looked with a flashlight, and finally found an earring that I lost. I have longed to recover all kinds of losses, and some have been restored, some have gradually healed, and some are still lost. As the U-2 song goes, "I still haven't found what I'm looking for"—at least not everything.

God is looking for us. God is not satisfied without us. God will move heaven and earth to find us. Since we are not inanimate coins, let's move out of the dark and dust we're hiding in and enjoy being found.

*SONG: Come, Ye Sinners, Poor and Needy*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Dear God, thank you for the assurance that you are looking for the lost, that you are looking for me when I am lost, and that my repentance, my being found, and finding anyone who is lost causes you to throw a party.*

—Becky Ankeny

*BIBLE READING: Isaiah 66:5-13*

I remember the day my daughter lost an election at school. At her high school, four kids ran for student body president, and the officers were assigned based on the number of votes. Over the intercom came the announcement: X has been elected president, Y vice-president, and Z secretary. But Z doesn't want to be secretary so [my daughter] will be secretary." The whole school heard that she was fourth of four and she was humiliated.

I wanted to set everything right and also say some stern things to the voice over the intercom. Moms are like that. I mourned over her. But I couldn't do anything besides hug her.

God feels that way about us, also. God wants to set things right for us, and God knows better than we do what that means. God wants to hug us and mourn with us. God wants to restore us to a place of being able to give, to love, and to rejoice.

End of the story: my daughter stepped up to the role of secretary, filled it honorably, learned to like the girl who won president, and prospered. She gained maturity and dignity through the disappointment and humiliation. Sometimes loss of face makes way for more beauty to shine.

God says here to a defeated people and city that God will set things right (and in the right way). God will restore the ability to nurture, to give, and to rejoice. God promises the same thing to us: "As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you" (Isaiah 66:13, NRSV).

*SONG: Near to the Heart of God*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: When we lose face and sometimes footing, dear Jesus, comfort us. By your love, restore us to joy and generosity.*

—Becky Ankeny

*BIBLE READING: Matthew 23:1-4, 13, 37-39*

I love that my daughters enjoy *Godspell* with me. Although that musical depicts Jesus as a flower child *par excellence*, it also shows his fiery side. When he describes the religious leaders, he says a lot of things that aren't very nice. No mom told him, "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all."

Jesus felt about these leaders the way a mother might feel about her child who bullies another child into being afraid of Mom. ("I'll tell! Mom will be so mad!") Jesus says to both children, "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!"(Matthew 23:37, NRSV).

What is clear is that Jesus loves both the bully and the victim. What Jesus doesn't love is the pecking order. These chicks set up standards of acceptability to God and bullied others so that those other chicks were afraid of God and gave up—failed to thrive. They saw (and taught others to see) the world as a hostile, zero-sum game with winners and losers. They did not trust in the love of God.

It's hard to put aside the desire for dominance and the desire for approval that trap children (Jesus' chicks) in games that distance them from divine love. Jesus just has to leave the bullies to themselves until they can see who he really is for them—the embodiment of love.

*SONG: Under His Wings*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Bless you, Jesus, for coming in the name of the Lord to show us what God is—love. Help us to gather together and nestle under that love.*

—Becky Ankeny

*BIBLE READING: Deuteronomy 32:8-14*

Parents celebrate first steps, first words, firsts of all kinds. They encourage teens to get a job, to go to college, to become adults, to take responsibility. We taught our daughters how to drive a car, though we knew the risks.

I remember when my daughters prayed for Jesus to live in their hearts. They were each around six, and we talked about this step of spiritual growing up. My job was to introduce them to the love of God and push them toward knowing God first-hand. Though I tried to teach them true things, I had (and have) to trust that God teaches them better than I can.

Many a sermon has been preached on how the eagle catches her eaglets when they fall and carries them on her back. This is not literally true in nature. But what is factual is that eagles deliberately make their nests less and less comfortable so that the eaglet will try to fly; they fly close to the nest carrying food but do not drop it in the nest, enticing the eaglet to follow. When the eaglet tries (and probably fails to some extent), they either feed it where it lands or lure it back to the nest. They do not quit until the eaglet can fly on its own.

Like the eagles, God's commitment to us and our children is to encourage us to try to follow, to keep trying, and thus to move toward maturity. We can completely trust God to sustain us, shield us, carry us, guide us, and stay with us.

*SONG: Day by Day, and with Each Passing Moment*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord, help me to be open to the next step of spiritual growth, to learn from you how to be what you made me.*

—Becky Ankeny