

A Mother's Love

A Sermon by James R. Newby

Text: First John 4:7-8, 11-12

My mother died of complications due to Alzheimer's disease. These words are difficult for me to share. I grew up in a home knowing a different mother—a mother of sharp mind and quick wit. For the most part, mom found meaning in life through the rearing of her children and supporting my father's ministerial work. She was involved in leadership positions for such groups as Church Women United and the YWCA, but these groups were always secondary to her family and her Meeting. An accomplished organist and pianist, she would use her musical skills in civic organizations and churches wherever we lived. My mother's heart and soul found full creative expression in the beautiful music her fingers could produce from a keyboard. Growing up at home it was not uncommon to be awakened by her playing Bach, Beethoven or Mozart on the piano. At the peak of her creativity, "gifted" is not too strong of a word to describe my mother's artistic talent.

Toward the end of her life, my mother, this woman who took such great pride in her family, did not know me. When I would look into her eyes and speak to her, she did not understand. Quietly she would sit in her chair by the bed, staring down at the floor. Periodically she would mumble, and her hands would move as though

she were knitting or playing the piano. There she sat, lost in an inner world which only she could know. Physically she was still strong to the end, but mentally she was diminished, living her life in the limbo of passing moments.

At first, they were little things. Mom would repeat herself. She would forget where she put her keys, or she would check her mailbox four or five times after she had already received her mail. Progressively such forgetfulness became worse. While driving she would not remember where she was going, or she would forget how to get home.

A family can live in denial of the symptoms... “Well, mom is involved with so many things, it is easy to forget,” or “Mom has always been a little forgetful, indicative of an absent-minded artist.” Slowly, however, and with the reinforcement of concern from my brother and sister, I had to acknowledge that my mother was experiencing something more than the occasional absent-mindedness. When the decision to move her to a care facility was made, and the testing that I had resisted, but my wife insisted upon was concluded, the truth about her ever worsening dementia became fully apparent.

What are we without our memories? What are we without the ability to recall events, places and persons in our life histories which make us who we are? These questions haunted me as my mother’s condition became progressively worse.

If it were not for my faith and my belief in spiritual renewal, I am not sure that I could have turned my focus from all of the negatives of my mother's condition, to experiencing the positive. Knowing that my mother was not going to get better—this was long before any of the new drugs for dementia had become available—I began to notice that she could still share certain gifts that were spiritually renewing. Such gifts were unique to me as I experienced them, but they are also universal.

First is the gift of grief. As with any loss that has connected us with one another, grief is a natural response. Because of her illness, I missed my mother's sense of pride in the accomplishments of her children. Like a little boy running home from school with some new "refrigerator art," I would bring my mother the very first copy of each of my books. She would always read it immediately, followed by a rave review. I grieved the loss of her encouragement. I missed her counsel, and I missed what can only be called her "German Stubbornness" and "Quaker Gentleness." With each visit to my mother's bedside, I would grieve the continuous cycle of memory and function loss.

Second is the gift of laughter. It was Abraham Lincoln who said, "If I did not laugh, I would cry." My mother's illness could evoke constant tears from those who were her caretakers. I found that the gift of humor and the gift of laughter to be an important antidote to the sorrow. Although clueless about the reason for the

laughter, mom could still smile even with her decreased mental capacity. Her mere presence would evoke fun family stories and lots of laughter.

Third is the gift of gratitude. Gratitude is one of those things in life that cannot be overdone. Of course I was most grateful for the nurses and other care givers who took care of mom, but there was a more profound sense of gratitude within me that my mother's condition evoked. I became grateful for the experience of spiritual connection that I felt as I sensed her confusion—her loss—her struggle to perform even the most elementary of tasks. The loss of memory stripped us of so many connections, but I was grateful for the deeper spiritual connection which her loss stirred within me.

Fourth is the gift of forgiveness and repentance. Because my mother's illness was one which progressed slowly, there was time for the gift of forgiveness and repentance. Families *wound* one another all of the time, both intentionally and unintentionally. Over the years such hurt can cause rifts between family members. Unlike my father's sudden death by heart-attack, where a "Good-Bye" was impossible, my mother's illness provided the opportunity for forgiveness, repentance and jubilee.

Finally, there is the gift of love. As my mother slowly drifted beyond this earthly realm, I could still love her. And then reaching out in concentric circles

from her being, I could share with others the love that she shared with me. “God is love” says John from our scripture passage this morning, which is the same passage I shared at my mother’s memorial service. *My mother’s illness could take away many things, but it could never destroy love.*

It has been referred to as *the long good-bye*. I believe it was Nancy Reagan who used this phrase in describing the last few years of her experience with President Reagan. Alzheimer’s is this, for sure, but it is certainly more. Within the process of saying, “Good-Bye” are certain gifts to be received—the gifts of grieving, laughter, gratitude, forgiveness and repentance, and love.

I miss my mom, especially on a day like today, and I know that many of you feel the same kind of loss. I think of her often. There are times when I feel her presence, in the same way that I feel my father’s presence. Even today my heart reaches out to her, and I love—I love her unconditionally as I remember all of the unconditional love she so generously gave to me. In the end she could not remember the events of our life together, nor the persons or the places. But I feel that in those last months of her life, she was involved in a much greater reflective task—that mysterious spiritual process of remembering from whence she came, and to which she has now returned.

I close with some words from Anne Lamott , which are found in her book, **Grace Eventually**. She is writing about the experience of losing her mother: “The other day, when I walked up the stairs to the house, my son Sam came out to greet me. He was on the phone with a friend, and I heard him say, ‘My mom’s home. I gotta go bond.’ That’s how I feel more and more about my mother—she’s home finally, and I gotta go bond.”