



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
The Reverend Canon Stephanie Spellers,
Canon to the Presiding Bishop for Evangelism, Reconciliation, and Creation

“Yes, Lord—Yes, Mama”

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, May 9th, 2021
The Sixth Sunday of Easter, Mother's Day
Based on Acts 10:44-48; Psalm 98; 1 John 5:1-6; John 15:9-17*

Sung:

*Mama, Mama you know I love you
Mama, Mama you're the queen of my heart
Your love is like tears from the stars, yes it is
Mama I just want you to know lovin' you is like food to my soul*

This week, I received the greatest compliment. My cousin Freda and I were checking in. She was giving me the update on our family in Kentucky. At some point, she declared, “You sound just like your mother Phyllis.” I’m not sure if she meant it as a compliment, but I absolutely took it that way.

My mom is a rock star. Dad left when I was 7, so she took on two jobs and raised me and my brother Gary on her own. Thank God, there were helping hands all around: grandmothers, aunts, uncles within shouting distance of our home in Frankfort, KY. It took a village to raise us, but make no mistake: Phyllis Spellers was the head of that village.

Mom has this beautiful, whole-mouth smile and a whole-body laugh, and everybody who knows her says she’s one of the kindest people they’ve met. They’ll also tell you she nags ... a lot, but if you listen to all the advice and urging and picking, you hear how much she wants to help. She can’t *not* help—her heart’s just that big.

I’ve been thinking and hearing and feeling a lot about my Mom this week, partly because of Mother’s Day and partly because of today’s scriptures. In them we hear about the love of the parent for the child, and how that love becomes real in the commandments and wisdom they pass to us. The more I prayed with the word of God and commandments of Jesus this week, the more I heard the voice of my mom, who is mother and father to me. I find that Mama Wisdom and the wisdom of God sound a lot alike.

For instance ... when I was a kid, Mom used to tell us, “You have to learn to color with all the crayons in the Crayola box.” Yes, she was talking about race, that you couldn’t just work or play or create with a limited palate of colors. I think she also meant, become humble and curious and attempt to see some gift, some light, in every person, however different they might be.

Her wisdom resonates for me with our reading from Acts 10. It’s this glorious, shocking moment when scripture says, “The Holy Spirit fell upon *all* who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out ... *even* on the Gentiles.”

The circumcised could not at first imagine the Gentiles as useful, holy, or good. I can hear them saying, “Leave those crayons over there—you can’t create anything with them.” But the Holy Spirit, she fell on everybody who heard the word. God wants to use and bless us all. Every color, every gender, every class background—every crayon in the box. And if God operates like that, how could we refuse?

Learn to color with all the crayons in the Crayola box. Yes, Lord. Yes, Mama.

Growing up, I was often the only Black student in circles of mostly white kids. I got into the habit of bottling up and shoving down parts of myself, so I could fit in. Mom once caught me talking on the phone with a friend, doing these light, constrained giggles. Well, these were the days of landlines. So she picked up the phone and announced: “If you’re going to laugh, laugh real and let it out. Otherwise, don’t laugh at all.” And then she hung up.

At the time I was beyond mortified. Only later did I recognize she was trying to set me free. To make sure I never shut down parts of myself and my culture in order to make privileged systems or groups more comfortable. Instead, she was telling me, let it all out.

Isn’t that what Psalm 98 is saying? God has done mighty things and delivered us. “So shout with joy to the LORD, all you lands; lift up your voice, rejoice, and sing.” String your harp. Lift your trumpets. Raise your voices. God doesn’t care if you sing off-key or dance awkwardly. God doesn’t care if you get loud or laugh in ways that feel less than dignified. In fact, God kinda likes it when we dance and sing and shout with abandon.

People of God, *“Laugh real. Let it out.”* Yes, Lord. Yes, Mama.

My mom is a peculiar breed of shopaholic. She loves to shop and has the closets to prove it, but she’s often thinking of others while she’s buying stuff. Family and friends know to stop at her house if they need something. She’s better than Walmart, because she’ll probably just give it to you.

I never understood, but she would smile and say, “Before you get one more thing for yourself, share with someone who actually needs it.”

She sounds a little like Jesus in John 15 today. He says “Love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” Jesus, of course, makes the ultimate commitment to self-giving love, when he dies on the cross in solidarity with the suffering peoples of the earth. Each of us can embody that generous, broken-open heart for others.

When you’re thinking or spending or planning for yourself or your loved ones, pause. Do you already have enough? What is enough? At what point do we as a church, as individual followers of Jesus, truly sacrifice to care for the wider human community and our hurting creation?

We would glimpse beloved community if we lived a little more by Mom’s words: *“Before you get one more thing for yourself, share with someone who actually needs it.”* Yes, Lord. Yes, Mama.

Maybe the most important wisdom I carry from mom isn’t really a commandment. It’s a statement of what is true: “I don’t care how old you are or where you go: you will always be my baby.”

I’m the younger of her two children, but when she calls me baby, I break out in hives. I hated it when I was younger. I hated it in my 30s. This year I turn 50, and she still starts most conversations with, “Hey baby girl.”

Even as I grumble, I feel her declaration grounding me on this earth. She's telling me about unconditional love, the unchanging and unflinching ideal love of parent for child, and she's saying you never outgrow your need for that love.

We need it from our mother figures. We need it even more from God. Through Jesus, we receive it. In John 15, he promises, "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love." In Christ the love of God has been poured out into this world. His invitation is to trust and abide in that love, to be baptized into it and continually transformed by it.

As the Catholic spiritual writer Henri Nouwen has pointed out, if I know I am unconditionally loved by God, then I am profoundly free to love and surrender for God. I don't need to cling to possessions, position or power. I can fall flat on my face and feel God's hand lifting me back up. I can welcome other groups into the tent without fearing their presence will equal less love for me. I know I am wrapped—we are wrapped—in the love of the one who made life possible.

"Oh child, I don't care how old you are or where you go: you will always be my baby." Yes Lord. Yes, Mama.

Like most children, we don't want to be told what to do—by God or anybody else. But if you listen to these commandments, you hear a word born of love. You hear God's desire for our joy, which sounds like my mom's.

So, thank God for our mamas, near and far, alive and resting eternal. Thank God for all the ways they've succeeded, failed, and just tried for our sakes. Thank God for the mamas who gave us biological life and the mamas who've loved and led us, whatever their gender or relationship to us. Thank God for the call on each of us to mother and draw one another into fullness of life.

Thank you, God. Thank you, Mama.

Amen.

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ⁱ Chorus from "Song for Mama" by Boyz II Men (<https://youtu.be/vdTnuc3ktzo>)