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“No Greater Love”  
Acts 1: 6-14, John 17: 1-11

Most years and again this year on Mother's Day, I want to begin by acknowledging what a precious day, but also what a difficult day, Mother's Day can be. Those of us who had good mothers and have good memories or good relationships with our mothers, find this to be a wonderful day, but it is always important that we acknowledge that this is not the case for everyone. For some people, Mother's Day is always very, very hard. One thing that can make Mother's Day hard, of course, is those who have lost their mother in the last year. And if you are one of those you probably come to Mother's Day with a lot of thanks in your heart, but also a lot of grief that you're carrying. As we enjoy the day and all of these festivities, it is important that we say to those who are grieving the loss of their mother, that we care for you and we grieve with you.

It's also important to recognize that there are always folks in every congregation who for whatever reason wanted to be a mother and were not and feel somehow awkward on Mother's Day. It picks the scab off the wound of their own life story. Life did not evolve as they wanted it to and Mother's Day is a painful day.

And then there are those others, thankfully not very many in number, but always those few, whose relationships with their own mothers are in some way estranged, in some way broken, and Mother's Day for them is not a good day. For mothers who are in some way estranged from their children, Mother's Day is not a good day. So as we begin this day and begin to go into all the festivities that go with Mother's Day, it is always important to remember that not everyone is celebrating, not everyone is happy, not everyone is gratified and getting flowers and giving flowers and all those kinds of things this day. There are some among us for whom this is a hard day and many in our world for whom this is a hard day. We do them a terrible disservice if we do not at least acknowledge the pain as well as the joy of this day.

Having said that, we also want to talk about a subject that is associated with family, with parenting, with mothering. The gospel of John has about three chapters that record Jesus' farewell address to his disciples. All through that address, part of which is today's gospel lesson, Jesus talks about his great commandment that they love one another. Today I want us to think about human love, yes, but human love in ways that point us in the direction of the love of God which is the great theme for Mother's Day.

In 1948, one of our country's greatest theologians, a man named Paul Tillich, published a book which included a sermon that he had preached sometime in the days during or immediately after the Second World War. What he said in that sermon sounds so incredibly current today. Listen to it with me, if you will. Tillich said “When death rains from heaven as it does now, when cruelty wields power over nations and individuals as it does now, when hunger and persecution drive millions from place to place as they do now, and when prisons and slums all over the world distort the humanity of the bodies and souls of people as they do now—we can boast in this time, and just in this time, that even all of this cannot separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”<sup>1</sup>

So whether this day is a great day for you or a tough day for you, either way we need to hear the message of God's love which comes to us in our joys and in our difficulties. This morning, I want to preach one of those sermons that preachers call skyscraper sermons. Skyscraper sermons are just

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<sup>1</sup>Tillich, Paul, The Shaking of the Foundations, 1948, p. 106-107

one story piled on top of another. I want to share a number of stories that point us in the direction of what it means to love and be loved and how all of that teaches us of God's love.

When you think about the love of God, perhaps it is good to remind ourselves that the love of God doesn't mean that everything always turns out right. That just because God loves us doesn't necessarily mean that God protects us from everything difficult. I've used this story of this skyscraper before, but it's worth hearing again.

In December of 1982, the 21 year old year old son of William Sloan Coffin, who was then a senior pastor of Riverside Church in New York, was killed in an automobile accident in which his car slipped off the street into the Boston Harbor. Now William Sloan Coffin was one of those pastors that was a very controversial guy and in many ways not a very pastoral sort of fellow. In World War II, he had served in the United States Army in the army unit that was a forerunner of the CIA. After the war he went into ministry and eventually became a chaplain at Yale. Coffin was a very controversial chaplain at Yale and became a part of the anti-war movement during the Vietnam War. So Coffin was one of these people around whom difficulties and conflicts and controversies always swirled and sometimes Coffin was anything but a gentle man. Well, after his son had been killed in this automobile accident, one Sunday morning someone in his church who was trying to be tender and kind to Coffin said to him, "I just don't understand God's will." Well, if you know anything about William Sloan Coffin, you know that was probably the worst thing in the world to say to him after his son was killed in this accident. Well meaning as this statement may have been, it didn't sit comfortably with Coffin, so Coffin spoke back to this person with a great deal of anger and said, "I'll say you don't understand God's will. Do you think it was the will of God that Alex never fixed that lousy windshield wiper? That Alex was probably driving too fast in the storm? And that Alex probably had too much to drink? Do you think it was God's will that there were no street lights along that stretch of road and no guard rails separating the road from the harbor? For some reason I can't get it through people's heads that God doesn't run around the world with his fingers on triggers, his fist around knives, his hands on steering wheels. God is dead set against all kinds of unnatural deaths. This is not to say there are no natural-caused deaths. There are. But the one thing that should never be said about any violent death like Alex's death is that it is the will of God. My own consolation lies in knowing that it was not the will of God that Alex died—but that when the waves closed in over the sinking car, God's heart was the first of all hearts to break."<sup>2</sup>

The love of God is a love so big that God's own heart breaks when our lives fall apart, when our lives are difficult, when our losses seem unbearable. The God of the Christian faith, the God that we worship, the God that we've seen in Jesus Christ is a God whose heart can break with ours. That's how much God loves us. So much that even God's great heart can break.

The love of God is not only a love which causes God's heart to break, but it is also a heart of enormous mercy and forgiveness. The founders of the Salvation Army were William and Catherine Booth. They were Methodists actually. The Salvation Army was born out of the Methodist church and out of a group of Methodists led by the Booths who thought that our church was not concerned enough about the poor and the needy. They separated from the church in order to give all their time and resources to serve the poor. In the early days of the Salvation Army, the Booths took care of everything as you can imagine, starting a new movement. They were everything. They were the executives. They were the treasurers. They were the janitors. They were the bookkeepers. They were everything for the Salvation Army. But as the Salvation Army grew and grew, it became necessary, of course, to hire people and divide up responsibilities. One of the people they hired early on was a young man who became almost a second son to them. He was hired to be the bookkeeper and treasurer, the accountant for the Salvation Army.

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<sup>2</sup>Told in "Pulpit Resource," 08/06/1989

Things went along as you would imagine as the Army continued to grow and prosper and serve more people. Then there came a point in the development of the Salvation Army where it seemed like the money was just never stretching to meet all the needs and it became more and more of a problem. The auditors came in to check the books and it was found that this young man who had almost been like a son to the Booths had been embezzling large sums of money from the Salvation Army. He was tried and put in jail.

The first day in jail when he was allowed to receive letters, he received a letter from the Booths. Every week that he was in jail, he received a letter from these people from whose life's work he had embezzled this money. When the time came when he was allowed visitors, the first visitors in line to see him were the Booths. All through his time in prison, they continued to be in contact with him as vigorously as they could and then when the day finally came when his term was over and he was released from prison, when the cold iron doors of the prison cell closed behind him for what he hoped was the last time and he walked out of the prison, who was there to greet him, but the Booths. They had a big picnic basket and they said "We're going on a picnic."

During this picnic they asked him what he was going to do now with his life and he said "I don't know what I can do. Who would hire me, an accountant who was a convicted embezzler?" The Booths said "We will." And they rehired him and put him back in his old position and never, ever again was a penny missing from the funds of the Salvation Army.

God's love is like that. A parent's love at its best is like that. A mother or father's love is at its best like that, but all of that human love points us to the love of God whose mercy and forgiveness and acceptance and readiness to give people another chance is endless.

Here's another story to pile up on this skyscraper sermon. It's a story about the great singer Marian Anderson. Marian Anderson was one of the great voices of our time and one time in an interview, Marian Anderson was asked what was the greatest day of her life? And she had so many to choose from. The great opera writer Toscanini once said that she had the greatest voice of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. She could have easily pointed to that day. She had sung at the White House for the Roosevelts and the King and Queen of England. She could have pointed to that day. She could have pointed to the day when her home city, Philadelphia, gave her an award for the person who had done the most for the city in that year. She could have pointed to Easter Sunday in a great Easter service in Washington D.C. where she stood in front of the Lincoln Monument and sang on Easter morning in front of 75,000 people including most of the leaders of government. She could have pointed to any number of days like that. But when Marian Anderson was asked what the greatest day of her life was she said "It was the day I was able to go home and tell my mother that she didn't need to take in washing to make ends meet anymore."<sup>3</sup>

Mother's Day is a day in which most of us revel in the kind of love we have experienced in our lives. When we do that, these and all the other human ways where mothers and others have loved us, have encouraged us, have forgiven us, have gone the second mile for us, who have stood beside us, these are all ways we learn about the nature of God. In all of those moments in our human lives, we have experienced in a small way what the love of God is like.

If it were possible to put on one side of one of those old fashioned balance scales the weight of all of the love and all of the care and all of the mercy that we have experienced in our entire life and on the other side of the scale the love that God has for us, it would be as if all those wonderful moments of our life were but a flake of talcum powder and the love of God was like the weight of the whole universe. The greatest human love we ever experience is nothing compared to God's love for us in

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<sup>3</sup>McGinnis, Alan Loy, The Friendship Factor, 1979, p. 30

Jesus Christ. On this day when we are celebrating human love, let us never forget from where that love comes. Amen.