

YOU ARE ACCEPTED

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich
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If current trends hold, the presidential election this fall will be, among other things, a referendum on the plasticity of gender roles in America. Donald Trump, an alpha male by any definition, has accused Hillary Clinton of playing the woman card. As has been widely reported, Trump has declared that if Clinton had not played the woman card, she wouldn't even get five percent of the vote.

Clinton lived in the White House for eight years as First Lady. She served for eight years in the U.S. Senate, a group that has previously seen 16 of its members make it to the White House. And she served as Secretary of State for four years, a position from which five of her predecessors also made it to the White House. For 12 of these 20 years, Senator Clinton filled roles traditionally held by men. In light of these inconvenient facts, Trump's comment can only mean that he thinks Senator Clinton's gender alone should lead people not to vote for her. It looks like we may have an opportunity to see if he's right.

I have two comments in response, neither of them political in nature. The first is that men have been mostly running the planet now for about – well, about always. But let's say for the sake of comparison that men have been running the planet for 5,000 years. It's clear by now what kind of world men have ended up making. What's not clear is that this man-made world will survive for another 5,000 years. I say, why not put women in charge for the next 5,000 years, and see what kind of world women end up making. And whichever gender turns out to have made a better world for everyone during their time in charge gets to run the planet for the following 10,000 years. It seems only fair – and I'm only partly speaking in jest.

My other comment has to do with the long-standing division of labor, initially established by evolutionary forces, between men as authority figures and women as nurturing figures. The most ancient root of the word "father" appears to make reference to a supreme deity, hence the first line of the Lord's Prayer, which reads, "Our Father who art in heaven." The English word "mother," in contrast, is based on the ancient Iranian word "ma," meaning breast, which formed the root of *madar*, meaning breast-haver. *Madar* became *mater* in Latin and eventually *mother* in our language. Our deep-seated sense that fathers are godlike authority figures to be feared and mothers are nurturing figures to be adored has grown from primordial roots.

With both mothers and fathers, however, the connection between ancient patterns of procreation and modern modes of parenting remains tenuous at best. In recent years, we've learned that gender identity is more a spectrum than a pair of

opposites. And we've also learned that two mothers can, between them, balance the need for authority and the need for nurture in the lives of their children, as can two fathers.

Even so, the ancient view that men should be godlike, powerful, capricious, and judgmental, and women should be womb-like, warm, compassionate, and long-suffering, persists even today. It is evident in the widespread assumption that boys will be boys and girls should be nice – and should not run for President.

The fact that people often react with disdain when a woman embodies an authoritative role rather than a nurturing role suggests that women, especially mother figures, symbolize something profoundly important to us. And no matter where in evolutionary history it comes from, and no matter the gender identity of the person who provides it today, the deeply-embedded archetype of a loving and nurturing maternal figure represents something essential. In my view, it represents a fundamental desire that pervades every aspect of our lives. It's what we most deeply want.

What is this inescapable longing? I think about the many terms and clichés that describe mothers and mothering: Mother Nature, Mother Earth, mother ship, motherland, mother lode, Mother of God, Mother Superior, mother tongue, mother's milk, Mother's Day. And there are many more as well, but one strikes me as especially noteworthy. It is this: a face only a mother could love.

The phrase suggests that a mother's love is unconditional, at least ideally. Curiously enough, maternal love and romantic love activate many of the same regions of the brain. When young mothers gaze at their children, the same brain areas are stimulated as when lovers stare at photos of their partners. And in both cases, the brain turns down the judgment.

Researchers at University College in London have discovered that love, whether maternal or romantic, suppresses brain activity associated with criticism and negative emotions. Perhaps this is why we have come to say that there are faces only a mother could love. Perhaps it is also why we say that love is blind.

However imperfect individual parents may be, maternal love symbolizes the commitment to love someone no matter what. No matter how imperfect our faces or how flawed our character or how dire our circumstances, someone will stand by us and love us anyway. The desire to be loved unconditionally, I believe, is the deepest desire we have. Love in this sense is an expression of both concern and obligation. We hold on tightly to maternal love as an ideal because it symbolizes feelings of deep concern for other people and continuing obligation to them.

While this may be true of mothers, it shouldn't be true only of them. The sense of duty and obligation to children should be true of fathers as well – and of step-parents and adoptive parents. Raising children requires an abiding commitment to love them and suffer with them, come what may.

This unconditional concern should also extend beyond the walls of our homes. It should extend to our neighbors, says the Hebrew Scriptures, and even to our enemies,

adds Jesus in the Christian New Testament. This kind of love doesn't necessarily indicate fondness for another person or approval of their actions or their character. It simply indicates an unconditional commitment to their good.

Sometimes this kind of love requires judgment or punishment. At other times it requires long suffering. Whatever comes, it is an unalterable commitment, a bond that cannot be broken. Of course, this kind of commitment is impossible for any one person to sustain, which is why humans have always looked to divine sources of unconditional love. The New Testament states the situation concisely: love is from God, for God is love.

There is a moment in Madeleine L'Engle's book, *A Wrinkle in Time* that captures the transforming power of love's unconditional commitment. The book describes a cosmic battle between good and evil, a struggle between the forces of light and the forces of darkness. The foot soldiers in this battle are three children: Calvin, Charles Wallace and their leader, a girl named Meg.

One of the mother figures in the story, a wise old woman named Mrs. Whatsit, gives each of the children a stratagem to use in their fight against the forces of darkness. To Calvin, she gives the ability to communicate with all kinds of people. To Charles Wallace, she gives resilience. And to Meg, she says, "Meg, I give you your faults." Mrs. Whatsit adds, somewhat later, "I love you, and I will always love you." Because Mrs. Whatsit accepts Meg's faults, Meg can accept them too. And her faults, anger, impatience, stubbornness, turn out to be the key to the children's triumph over the forces of evil. Through Meg, the power of unconditional love ultimately vanquishes the forces of darkness.

In symbolic terms, the book describes end of the battle this way: "Suddenly there was a great burst of light through the Darkness. The light spread out and where it touched the Darkness, the Darkness disappeared. The light spread until the patch of Dark Thing had vanished, and there was only a gentle shining, and through the shining came the stars, clear and pure."

The theological term for what Meg received from Mrs. Whatsit is grace. Grace is the experience of being loved unconditionally, without a view to our merit or worthiness. Paul Tillich, one of the greatest theologians of the Twentieth Century, describes the experience in the following way:

Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when we feel our separation is deeper than usual, because we have violated another life, a life which we love, or from which we were estranged. It strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility, and our lack of direction and composure has become intolerable to us. It strikes us when, year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair

destroys all joy and courage. Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: 'You are accepted. You are accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know...'

If that happens to us, we experience grace. After such an experience, we may not be better than before, and we may not believe more than before. But everything is transformed.

More than anything, we want to be accepted — as we are, where we are, without conditions or qualifications or performance guarantees. Grace comes to us when we are accepted not because of our strength but despite our weakness, when we are celebrated not because of our achievements but despite our failures, when we are embraced not because of our beauty but despite our lack of superficial appeal. In the presence of a love like this, everything is transformed.

As Meg demonstrated, the work of making divine love real in this world is our work. Whether or not we are mothers or even identify as female, each of us can see people around us struggling alone in the darkness, desperate souls who need to be loved. Reach out to them and say, "I give you your faults. You are accepted — unconditionally." In this sense, every day can be Mother's Day.

There is nothing we want more than this: to be accepted, just as we are. When divine love comes to us in this way, everything is transformed. The darkness disappears. The light begins to shine. And morning dawns in our lives once again.