



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
The Right Reverend Dean E. Wolfe, D.D., *Rector*

The Things We Never Knew

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, Sunday, May 14, 2017
The Fifth Sunday of Easter*

*Come Holy Spirit, and kindle the fire that is in us.
Take our lips and speak through them.
Take our hearts and see through them.
Take our souls and set them on fire. Amen.*

Philip said (to Jesus), “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me?”

I was struck this week by a touching article in the *New York Times* by writer Edan Lepucki who, after finishing a novel involving mother/daughter relationships, invited daughters on social media to send in pictures of their mothers... *before* they were mothers.

Many women responded to the creative invitation she extended, and she wrote, “I wasn’t prepared for... how powerful the images I received would be.... The young women in these pictures are beautiful, fierce, sassy, goofy, cool, sweet—sometimes all at once.”ⁱ

It’s really hard to imagine our mothers before we came into their lives. Children view their parents through very specific (and often very narrow) lenses. How can we possibly imagine what our mothers were like before they lived into the responsibilities of marriage, parenthood, or a vocation outside the home?

For Lepucki, one fascinating thing about the photos the women sent of their mothers is that at the moment they were taken, the vibrant young women in these photographs have no idea what life will bring them.

- They don’t yet know about the colleges they’ll attend or the triumphs they’ll achieve.
- They haven’t yet met the children to whom they will give life, nor conceived of the heartbreaks they will endure.
- They’ve not fully imagined destructive illnesses, divorce, or death and, in this one snapshot moment in their lives, they hold only a vague idea of the magical adventures on which they will embark.

Mother’s Day (or Father’s Day, for that matter) cannot be found on the Church’s Liturgical Calendar. (If it were, the story of the stoning of Stephan would probably not be the first lesson for a liturgy on Mother’s Day!) Still, good parenting is a Christian virtue, and the honoring of fathers and mothers is one of the Ten Commandments by which everyone in the Judeo-Christian tradition strives to live.

Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me?”

Now, Philip had traveled a long road with Jesus. In the Gospel according to John, he’s one of the first apostles to be called. He’s the guy who discovers Nathaniel for Jesus and he’s mentioned by name at the Feeding of the Five Thousand. So, Philip has been there. He’s been around some. He’s seen Jesus interact with people unnumbered... from morning till night. He’s heard him teaching and preaching and he’s witnessed his miraculous acts.

So, who knew Jesus better than Philip?

But sometimes you can be too close. Sometimes you just can't see the forest for the trees. Philip, in a difficult moment, demands proof he can hang on. It's a reasonable request. In fact, it's a request most of us would want to make, but in making it, Philip reveals he just doesn't understand who this Jesus is. You see, we can be in the presence of someone and never really know them.

Who knew Jesus better than his disciples? And yet at key moments in the biblical narrative, they appear not to know him at all!

We can spend nearly every day of our young lives with our mothers and still know only the smallest slice of who they really are...or were. (Wives and husbands often think they know everything about one another until they arrive at a critical moment when they realize they don't.) Likewise, we can spend a lifetime with biblical stories, hear them so often we tire even of the words, and yet never actually enter into the reality they convey.

Perhaps the story of Stephen's martyrdom is not such an unlikely story to tell on Mother's Day because it's a story of bravery and the consequences of truth telling. It's a story of sacrifice and the story of how we treat those who question the conventions of their time. We might ask Stephen, "How is it possible to love someone more than you love your own life?"

Ask any mother or father. When a child is brought into your life, either by birth, or by adoption, or by some grand providence, your life is forever changed!

On Mother's Day, as on every other day, we tend to oversimplify images of motherhood and femininity. In doing so, we probably distort both. Edan Lepucki observes, "In studying these photos, and each daughter's interpretation of them, I've come to wonder what traits we allow our mothers to have, and which ones we view as temporary, expiring with age and the beginning of motherhood. Can a woman be both sexual and maternal, daring and responsible, innocent and wise?"

Mothers are either held up as paragons of selflessness, or they're discounted and parodied. We often don't see them in all their complexity." ⁱⁱ

Ah, complexity, that wonderfully complex concept. Just beyond whatever we see or understand, lies a deep and multi-layered ocean of circumstance and consequence—an intricacy which extends into infinity. Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me?"

The real answer is "No." No, he does not know him. Philip thinks he does and, later in his life, he will give up his very life for Christ, being crucified upside-down according to one tradition. You see, even Philip is far more complex than it may first appear.

Too often we discover we possess only versions of one another... and not the genuine article.

Lepucki concludes, "Many of us find a breezy toughness in the bygone versions of our mothers, and we envy it. Before a kid or two tied her down, Mom was hitchhiking, or she was playing softball with guys, or like Julia's mom, she was 'transcribing tapes from her time as a war reporter like it's the most casual thing in the world.'

"Paria, whose mother fled Iran during the Revolution, notes her mother's resilience; then, as now, her mom maintains a 'joie de vivre.' ⁱⁱⁱ

"For daughters, these old photos of our mothers feel like both a chasm and a bridge. The woman in the picture is someone other than the woman we know. She is also exactly the person in the photo—still, right now. Finally, we see that the woman we've come to think of as Mom— whether she's nurturing or disapproving, thoughtful or delusional, or pestering or supportive, or sentimental—is also a mysterious, fun, brave babe.

“She’s been here all this time.”

Not unlike these old photos, the Bible, too, is both a chasm and a bridge. The Christ in the Gospels is someone other than the Christ we think we know and, like Philip, we may not recognize him even if we encountered him face-to-face. Jesus is, also, exactly as depicted in the gospel; still, right now.

It is good to seek in our mothers the depth and complexity of their realities, so that we may love them (and sometimes forgive them) all the more.

And it is good to discover in one another, and in our God, a complexity which allows us to love one another more deeply, and forgive one another (and sometimes even our God) more freely.

I think about that young girl in that photograph, and all the hopes and dreams she had. And how many of them were discovered and how many of them were confounded.

We are more than we seem and we are all called to recognize that complexity in one another.

Amen.

ⁱ *The New York Times*, The Opinion Pages, “Our Mothers as We Never Saw Them,”
by Edan Lepucki, May 10, 2017

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.