

PRAYING TO GIVE BIRTH AGAIN

by Denny Lynn Engelke

Good morning. And to all of you, Happy Mother's Day! And warm greetings to our online church. So many traditions are associated with Mother's Day. At my house it was breakfast in bed served by two excited little boys, and I can tell you: cold eggs and burnt toast never tasted so good! After church this morning, and before you continue your day of celebrating, please join us on the patio for coffee and treats. We are a COMMUNITY CHURCH, and we are all about building relationships!

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So, what's a nice girl like me – well, okay, a grandmother like me – doing in a pulpit like this? Well, I was nudged. The seed for my speaking to you this morning was planted one year ago. Our Pastor, Bruce Van Blair, asked in his Mother's Day Sermon last year, "Don't you think that women should be preaching on Mother's Day?" And I thought to myself, "Yes, I do." In the months that followed, the seed germinated, and I kept getting nudged. The nudges presented themselves in my private thoughts, in whispers. I have to be really quiet and mindful to notice nudges, and that's not easy in this incredibly fast and busy world, with all its distractions. So prayer came into play, helping me to recognize those nudges as the Spirit, calling me into service, giving me an assignment. Am I nervous? Yes! It is an honor for me to be speaking to you, and I don't know whether or not to thank Bruce for allowing me this opportunity. I guess we will all find out together. Never in a million years did I think I would be addressing a congregation, but when God is in charge, you never know what can happen.

I have been hanging around this little church for over thirty years – sporadically, and with limited spiritual understanding and varying degrees of belief, but with abiding loyalty and allegiance. Back in the 1980s, I heard about a children's Wednesday Afternoon Program here, and our oldest son started attending with neighborhood friends. Before long I was helping prepare meals for the kids, sewing choir robes for the children's choir, teaching Sunday School. I have participated in several Bible studies over many years, explored the

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Designer's plan for me in astrology, and taught my Growing Up Together Class to pre-teens and their parents. In recent years I have attended several church retreats, been committed to my study group, implemented the disciplines of daily prayer and study of the Scriptures, and attended church regularly.

Clarity is coming. I have been listening more and paying attention, making connections between the Spirit and everyday occurrences. I am learning that it is easier to face disappointments and handle heartache when I invite God into my heart and mind. I am starting to get this Faith Thing, and to resolve some but not all of my conflicted views about being a Christian. Brené Brown is a research professor at the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work. Her 2010 TED Talk on "The Power of Vulnerability" is one of the top-five most-viewed TED Talks in the world. She says "Faith is a place of mystery, where we find the courage to believe in what we cannot see and the strength to let go of our fear of uncertainty. Faith minus vulnerability and mystery equals extremism. If you've got all the answers, then don't call what you do 'faith.'"

But now – back to mothers. We mothers are ubiquitous – we are all over God's Creation, born of religious stories or secular descriptions. To name more than a few, many associated with widely held images:

Motherland	Foster Moms	Super Moms
Mother Tongue	Octo-Mom	Stage Mothers
Mother Nature	Unwed Mothers	Mother's Intuition
Mother Mary	Surrogate Moms	Mother Superior
Mommy Wars	Helicopter Moms	Mother Church
Mother Earth	Biological Moms	Stay-at-home Moms
Mama Bears	Adoptive Moms	Working Moms
A Mother's Love	Teen Mothers	Gay and Straight Moms
Jewish Mothers	Single Moms	Old Mother Hubbard
Room Mothers	Stepmothers	Mother Goose
Den Mothers	Wicked Stepmothers	Mother Teresa
Queen Mother	Soccer Moms	And the much-maligned, manipulative, interfering
Grandmothers	Tiger Moms	Mother-in-Law
Godmothers	Mom Jeans	
Fairy Godmothers	Mother Sauces	

Mothers are members of one of the most powerful demographics on earth. As the poem by William Ross Wallace states: “The hand that rocks the cradle is the hand that rules the world.”

Accomplished speakers advise knowing your audience before you open your mouth. So please, raise your hand if you are a mother. Raise your hand if you are a mother-to-be. Now, raise your hand if you *have* a mother. The fact that unites us is that we all had a mother. Not a one of us is motherless. And our mothers, by their presence or lack thereof, influenced us. Our mothers do not always live up to our expectations. Sometimes they disappoint us. Not all of them are kind and loving. Some are mean, cruel and abusive, leaving their children wounded. Your own mother may feel remorse for things she did or did not do in parenting you. Harry Belafonte said in a 2012 interview that sometimes we have to go backward to understand our mothers and the obstacles they faced, and what price we paid as a consequence. My own mother was complex and difficult at times.

But when all is said and done, our complicated and imperfect mothers made it possible for us to be HERE, and hopefully, as we mature, we forgive them for their flaws and love them anyway. Being a mom is hard. It takes a lot of energy, attention and stamina to make sure a defenseless little baby grows into a person. Make no mistake about it: once a mother, you are changed forever, at a visceral level. A new and permanent dimension is added to your universe, unlike anything else. The writer Anne Lamott said, “There really are places in the heart you don’t even know exist until you love a child.” And we continue to love our children even when their words and behaviors hurt us to our core.

According to the old adage, we parents do our best. But the adage comes with baggage – our life stories, which include our joys, and also our cumulative hurts and disappointments. Being a parent is the most important job we will have, and the one for which we are least prepared. Babies do not come with instructions, and hospitals do have a no-return policy! So we are left overwhelmed by mommy-blogs, books, trends and unsolicited advice. I wish I knew then what I know now: that neglecting a prayerful relationship with God, not trusting Him, and believing I could craft my own future and control outcomes all stood in the way of me being the best parent I could be.

Where my two sons are concerned, the “Let Go and Let God” instruction was especially difficult, particularly as they grew up,

changed and claimed their independence. The hardest part of parenting is knowing when to push and when to back off. In retrospect, I could have done better. But after all, I have only been a parent for thirty-nine years ... I'm still learning! I wish that all of us grownups would recognize how smart our kids are, whether they are babies, toddlers or teens. Likewise, I hope that my children and yours come to understand that we, their parents, can see around some of the corners. A meal of focused observation and concentrated listening, served with condiments of empathy and tolerance, would go a long way toward achieving mutual understanding between parents and their children.

So, how did motherhood and me get started? My first memory goes back to age seven or eight when my Uncle Milton asked me how many children I wanted to have, and I replied "twelve." His reaction was sweet surprise, and I am certain he disguised his amusement at my answer. I cannot say why I remember this incident, but upon reflection, it was telling. I always wanted to be a mom. I never imagined that my road to motherhood and grandmotherhood would be so challenging and heart-wrenching.

Uncle Milton (who drove a blue Studebaker that looked like a horizontal rocket) was married to my Aunt Etta, one of my father's five siblings. The Chupacks were a large Jewish family of six kids, living in Los Angeles. All of the Chupack brothers and sisters married, some of them more than once, including my father, yet from those six came only five offspring – me and my four cousins. When we were growing up, "The Family," as we called the Chupack clan, crowded into Mama and Papa's small apartment for Shabbat dinners, and we celebrated holidays (including Christmas!) in other family members' modest homes. I remember Grandma lighting the white candles at sundown on those Friday nights, but I never understood the meaning behind the ritual. Besides the ribbing and kvetching, we always gathered around a table laden with deliciously prepared and presented meals – roast chicken, kasha, matzo ball soup.

Daddy married a Gentile, my mom, and they had just me. My mother and her two younger brothers grew up in Oklahoma. Talk about cultural divides! Those two uncles were more prolific, and I enjoyed playing with my seven cousins when we visited one another. Laughter and food were also prominent at these extended-family gatherings, but the menu was Southern – biscuits and gravy, fried chicken, amazing pies. Did I mention that food is a theme in my life?

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I don't know how my parents arrived at the decision to raise me up as a Christian, but I attended Sunday School at the First Christian Church, where I was baptized in a kind-of bathtub in front of the entire congregation. You don't forget an experience like that! In my early teens, drawn in by a youth group, I became a member of a nearby Missouri Synod Lutheran Church, and attended there until college, when I began to question the whole idea of Christianity. I became a Doubter, uncomfortable with all doctrine and belief that my growing up years had instilled in me. Despite that Christian upbringing, I am still a beginner on The Way. I was not even clear on what The Gospels were until recently, and please don't ask me to quote Scripture. I suppose that Spiritual Development can be likened to Child Development. We learn at our own individual pace and on our own level of readiness. You have got to be searching in order to find.

I have many happy childhood memories, but all was not rosy. There was volatility in my home, and traumatic events that remain with me to this day. Nevertheless, I desperately clung to that Norman Rockwell image of hearth and home, and expected that one big happy family would someday be mine.

Let's remember that Mother's Day is not all flowery and sweet for everyone. It can be a difficult day for those who wanted children and never had them. For those who had to tragically bury their children. For those whose relationship with their mother was far less than enviable. For fathers who have lost their partners. For children who have lost their moms at a young age. Mother's Day was sad for me for a long while. I am a mom who did not give birth. My "pregnancies" were not nine months long, but years long. To get back to my story, I finished college, married my husband and, after several years as a couple, we began talking about starting a family. It took twelve years of marriage to complete our family of four, with two private adoptions, four years apart. My labor pains were the three hundred letters I typed – tearfully – on a manual typewriter, to doctors all over the U.S., which were accompanied by our personal resume, asking for referrals for a baby we could love. Then there was the anguish of waiting for months to go to court and make those adoptions final. Adoption is not an easy way to create a family. The generosity of my boys' birthmothers allowed me to be a mom. I remain eternally grateful. When my husband George and I were in Lexington, Kentucky, visiting the hospital nursery where our youngest son was born, I remember voicing some feelings of inadequacy to a nurse there. She quickly announced, in a charming Kentucky drawl, "HAVING a baby does not a mother make!" I was

reassured that although I did not birth and nurse a child, I could still be a good mom. That meant a great deal to me.

In my career as a home economist and teacher, I have mothered kids of all ages, including preschoolers and high schoolers and teenage felons wearing ankle bracelets under house arrest; taught hundreds of pre-teens (with their parents) about puberty and reproductive health; even helped a thirteen-year-old father understand the fundamentals of bedtime rituals for his baby boy. I have been a partner in a long and loving marriage to a wonderful man, and together we raised and launched our two sons. With the hope of achieving that storybook image of the Golden Years, I joyfully anticipated welcoming two daughters-in-law into our family, and playing with grandchildren. I have relished the happy prospect of extended-family gatherings and celebrations, and revisiting childhood through observing and interacting with my children's children. For now, that is not my reality. Some of these dreams may still come true, and maybe someday our two grandchildren will meet their grandparents face to face, in person, not on a screen. In the meantime, I am grateful for what I do have. My Faith Family – who accepts me and nourishes me, laughs and celebrates with me, comforts and reassures me – is HERE! It's a bigger family than my eight-year-old mind ever envisioned, and it is a spiritual home where everyone is welcome at the table.

We talk a lot about Vocatio at this church – our Calling, our Purpose here on the planet. As we navigate the hills and valleys of our existence, we learn to make connections between God's Guidance and our unfolding lives. This requires some deliberate concentration and patient prayer. It means setting aside a time and place to focus, meditate and wait for the Spirit to show us The Way. This odyssey is not easy. It is difficult, and like any new discipline, it requires practice. There are not any quick fixes or quick answers on this journey. We begin to see that maybe those coincidences were not serendipitous, but instead something Divine.

I know, I know; we have heard over and over again that “things happen for a reason.” Well – yes they do! Nudges from the Spirit tell us to come out of the shadows and push us closer to where we should be. I never imagined I would be trying to figure out my Purpose at this age and stage. I thought my Vocatio would take care of itself, and that in this season of my life I would be enjoying that fanciful image of a grandmother. But instead, my core identity was shaken by a series

of devastatingly painful relational events that fractured our family of four, leaving me feeling despondent – overcome with uncontained raw sorrow, and nothing seemed right with the world. I had to reevaluate my reason for being here. Life is what happens when you have made other plans. Bruce has said that “relationships are designed for our growth.” I am going to have to go shopping for a new Spiritual Wardrobe, because growth has been ongoing these past few years and the old stuff just doesn’t fit anymore.

So now, I find myself between jobs. I am not comfortable with the concept of retirement. There must be more that God wants me to do, so I am once again an expectant mother: Sometimes sleepless and uncomfortable, preparing to give birth again to a new iteration of myself. Praying and waiting to hear God’s direction and His next assignment for me, and to better understand His purpose for my life. Rather than clinging to wishful expectations, I am working toward trusting my Creator and recognizing the signs given me by His Son in the form of the Holy Spirit. Brené Brown discussed *her* return to her church after a long absence. She confided that she went back to church to find comfort. Instead she found challenge. In her words, “Church wasn’t an epidural, it was a midwife. It just stood next to me and said ‘Push, it’s supposed to hurt a bit.’”