

Honor Your Mothers, Part 2

Some things are just better in person.

- I attended two “birthday parties” over the past couple weeks. One was online, the other was a birthday “parade.” They were both very creative ... but hugs are better.
- It was Mother's Day last Sunday. FaceTime was good, driving by and waving was good ... hugs are better. Ordering delivery for mom is cool, but sitting down with her at table is better. Because some things are just better in person.
- Steve Smith's daughter graduated from high school last week. They did the best they could. Students made appointments so they could walk across the stage in an empty room to get their pictures taken. But, Steve says, some things are just better in person.
- Have you ever been to a UK basketball game at Rupp? I enjoy watching their games on TV, but being in the room?! Even my wife, Julie... She is not a basketball fan, but she loves going to Rupp for a game, because there's just something about being there, in person.
- A couple of years ago Julie and I went to Dallas, TX for the Cowboys Thanksgiving Day game. It was incredible! Some of you need to know that every godly pastor is a Cowboys fan, because God is. That's why there's a hole in the roof of the stadium – so God can watch the games. Anyway, I love watching the Cowboys on TV. But I was in AT&T stadium, sitting no more than a half a dozen rows from the field. My wife Julie was mystified. I was jumping up and down, hooting and hollering, high fiving anyone who was close. Julie said, “Stephen, you're high fiving total strangers!” And I was like, “I am not! These aren't strangers, these are family!” Because some things are just better in person.
- Like ... Like Like church. And I'm not willing to give God second best.

My family and I have done our best to engage with our church family every Sunday morning over the past couple of months. We will gather in our living room, like many of you; we'll check in so others know we're there; sometimes the ladies will sing along quietly; then we will all join with everyone else in the Lord Supper; we listen to the sermon, which everyone agrees is amazing. But guys, I miss being in the room. I know this will be strange for some of you, but I struggle to worship. I'm usually in the critique mode: what's working, what's not; what do we need to fix; stuff like that. But it's amazing what stirs me to worship when I'm in the room. Sometimes I will hear a voice, maybe someone on the worship team, or sometimes somebody near me. I hear them singing to our God, and I focus in on their voice, and their worship moves me towards God. Sometimes I'll glance around the room and I'll see one of you guys engaging God. It's written all over you. And watching you worship brings me back into the presence of God. And sometimes it's just the power of the room. Sometimes when 200 or 300 Jesus followers are worshipping God ... it is electric. His presence becomes almost palpable, you can feel it. Some things are just better in person.

I think part of the power of in-person church has to do with touch. We were wired by God to need touch. We were wired by God to do life shoulder to shoulder, hand in hand. And in an increasingly digital age non-sexual human touch is becoming even more and more important. I read an article in Psychology Today last week which talks about how we are touch deprived. We live in a country starved for physical affection.

Now you are probably aware of the power of touch when it comes to babies. Skin to skin contact is vital for their healthy physical and emotional and social development. But you may not know that it's important for the momma too. Skin to skin contact with her baby reduces momma's stress levels, lowers her depression, and makes her more responsive to her baby. In fact -- this is really cool, I wasn't aware of this -- some research shows that for mommas who have just given birth, the skin on her chest elevates a degree or two higher than the rest of her body, creating a natural warming area

for the baby. And, believe it or not, if the baby's temperature drops, the mom's temperature rises; and if the baby's temperature rises, the mom's temperature cools. We have an amazing God, don't we? And you probably know that not enough physical touching can actually kill a baby. If a baby is not held, nuzzled, and hugged enough, they can stop growing, and if the deprivation lasts long enough, they can even die.

But you might not know that touch is nearly as important for adults too. Research shows us that students who receive a supportive touch from their teachers do better as students. Patients who receive a sympathetic touch from their doctor feel more cared for. The physical touch of a loved one can soothe depression and strengthen relational bonds. In fact, couples that touch more report more satisfaction in their relationships. This one was kind of weird to me. Have you ever seen the basketball player reach out and touch his teammates after a free throw? Now it made sense to me they you would give your teammate a low five If he makes the free throw. But these guys are pumping out low fives even when their teammate misses! But as I was reading on this stuff, I discovered that better teams are measurably touchier. That little touch is just encouraging, it gives a boost, "We're with you. We are in this thing together."

Apparently, a warm non-sexual touch can set off the release of oxytocin, a hormone that creates a sensation of trust. And it also seems to reduce levels of cortisol, the stress hormone. They have even found that a warm non-sexual touch boosts the immune system. That would be cool, right? I don't think I really understood the power of touch until I came to Capital City. I suppose I was used to shaking people's hands, but people kept coming up and hugging me ... even guys. That was weird! But then I began to understand that the people in this family just flat out care for each other. And I began to understand the power of touch.

But the importance of in person church goes way deeper than that. The power of in-person church, the power of the ekklesia, the power of the called out gathered together goes way deeper than just our worshiping together. You see it on the wall in our foyer. A healthy church is a place where people worship, connect, grow, and serve ... together.

- We can worship online, but it is way, way more powerful together in the room.
- We can connect by FaceTime or Zoom, but it is way, way more powerful in someone's kitchen.
- We can grow in our understanding of God by taking an online class. But I used to be a college professor. Online classes can be good, but they can't replace being in the room.
- Worship, connect, grow ... and we can serve online. We can send in a check, or we can serve in some way on our own, but there is something about serving shoulder to shoulder, sweating together. And serving together is one of the most powerful catalysts for spiritual growth.

OK, I told you last week that we were going to do Mother's Day a little differently. In fact, this is really Part 2 of a two-part sermon. The sermon is titled, "Honor your mothers." Plural, honor both of them. Because, if you are a Jesus follower you have two. And if you are not a Jesus follower yet, you need two. The Bible says, repeatedly, "Honor your parents," "Honor your father and mother," And I think it applies to both moms. Last week was about honoring our physical mom, today is about honoring our spiritual mom. Have you figured out who she is?

I'm not making it up. She is described in the Book of Revelation chapter 12. The Apostle John is given this vision by God, and this is part of what he sees. He says, "I witnessed in heaven an event of great significance. I saw a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon beneath her feet, and a crown of twelve stars on her head. She was pregnant, and she cried out because of her labor pains

and the agony of giving birth.” Who is she? You’re going to guess Mary, but she’s more than that. And who is the baby going to be. You’ve got it ... Jesus.

John says, “Then I witnessed in heaven another significant event. I saw a large red dragon with seven heads and ten horns, with seven crowns on his heads. His tail swept away one-third of the stars in the sky, and he threw them to the earth. He stood in front of the woman as she was about to give birth, ready to devour her baby as soon as it was born.” So, who is the dragon? Yeah, that’s Satan, ready to attack the Christ-child.

Then John says, (The woman) “She gave birth to a son who was to rule all nations with an iron rod.” That’s Jesus! “And her child was snatched away from the dragon and was caught up to God and to his throne.” That’s when Jesus ascended to the Father. “And the woman fled into the wilderness, where God had prepared a place to care for her for 1,260 days.” (Revelation 12.1-6) Guys, the woman is the church! Do you know how we know?

Here’s John, a few verses later. He says, (The dragon) “he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. (But) The woman was given the two wings of a great eagle, so that she might fly to the place prepared for her in the wilderness, where she would be taken care of for a time, times and half a time, out of the serpent’s reach. Then from his mouth the serpent spewed water like a river, to overtake the woman and sweep her away with the torrent. (That’s Satan attacking the church.) But the earth helped the woman by opening its mouth and swallowing the river that the dragon had spewed out of his mouth. (That’s God protecting the church.) Then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to wage war against the rest of her offspring (against the rest of her offspring! that’s us!) — those who keep God’s commands and hold fast their testimony about Jesus.” We are – you are – her offspring. She is our mother. He’s talking about the church, the mother of all who keep God’s commandments and confess that they belong to Jesus. By the way, spoiler alert: the dragon loses, we win!

Some people think it’s a Catholic idea: “Mother Church.” But it’s not ... it’s rooted in our New Testament. I think the first time I really understood its power was at a Promise Keeper’s rally a couple decades ago. There was this old black preacher ... he was really, really good. He says, “If the church ain’t your momma, God ain’t your daddy!” If the church ain’t your momma, God ain’t your daddy! And he was right! He was actually quoting an old dead guy named Cyprian, who was one of the greatest leaders of the church about 1800 years ago. Cyprian said, “No one can have God as Father who does not have the church as mother.” And he was right!

The greatest Christian teachers have been telling us that for 2000 years. You see, you, me, every one of us ... God used the church to birth us spiritually. And God uses the church to grow us up – to teach us, to feed us, to encourage us, to care for us. One of the greatest protestant reformers, an old dead guy named John Calvin, put it like this. He said, "There is no other way to enter into life (into spiritual life) unless this mother (the church) conceives us in her womb, gives us birth, [and] nourishes us at her breast.... [A]way from her bosom one cannot hope for any forgiveness of sins or any salvation." Holy cow! So, when God says, “Honor your mother...” Well, if you are a Jesus follower, you have two!

You see, the church was God’s idea. I’m not talking about the building. The Church was God’s idea – invented by God, built by Jesus, empowered by the Holy Spirit. Jesus said, “On this rock (on this conviction that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, on this rock) I will build my church.” That’s Jesus talking. Jesus says, “I will build my ekklesia, and the gates of hell will not overcome it.” Now Jesus isn’t talking about our buildings, he’s talking about us. He says, “On this rock I will build

my ekklesia,” literally my “called out ones,” the assembly, the gathering, the congregation ... that community of us Jesus followers. Because we weren’t meant to go it alone.

So, in our new covenant with God there are these powerful images of the church.

- We are called the bride of Christ. It is ironic how many try to love on God while they despise his bride. I know that God is perfect, and our spiritual mother is not. But how can you love the father unless you’re trying to love his bride?
- And the church, the gathering, the called out ones, is called the body of Christ. Together we are the body of Christ. Jesus is the head, we are the body. And so many Jesus followers try to do life with God without being attached to the body! But a Jesus follower without a church is like a finger without a hand, a knee without a leg, lungs without a chest. Without being connected with the other called out ones we wither and we die.
- And the church, this collective of called out ones, is called the temple of the Holy Spirit. Now I know the Holy Spirit lives in each Jesus follower individually. But there is something mystical and powerful when Jesus followers worship, and connect, and grow, and serve together. When two or three of you are gathered together, Jesus says, I’m in your midst.
- And the church is called our mother. Our spiritual mother through whom we are birthed, and nurtured, and mended, and taught, and scolded, and encouraged, and dragged to heaven.

So, guys, honor your mothers ... both of them! You see, the church is not some optional add-on to our relationships with God. Listen: your relationship with God is inseparable from your relationship to his bride ... our mom. Here it is again: The quality of your relationship with God can be measured by the quality of your relationship to his bride, his body, our mom.

So, when he says, Honor your father and your mother ... If you are a Jesus follower, that includes honoring God the Father, and the church, our mother.

So, honor your mothers ... your physical mom, and, I think, your spiritual mom. But that can be really hard, right? For two reasons. Reason #1: Because sometimes momma is a mess. Sometimes the church is not a very good mom. Our spiritual Father – God the Father – he’s perfect: perfectly holy, perfectly good, perfectly wise, perfectly just, perfectly loving. But the church – the gathering, that congregation of messed up Jesus followers – she’s far from perfect! So, it has become trendy to diss the church, criticize the church, poke at the church, point out her flaws, her faults, her failures. And, because the church is us, there are plenty of flaws and faults and failures to diss.

But I wonder ... What if someone treated your physical mom like they treat the church. Has your biological momma ever stretched the truth? Then your momma’s a liar, right! Has she ever gotten anything wrong? Then your momma’s stupid, right? Has your momma every been thoughtless? Then she’s self-centered, right! Has your momma ever been snarky? Has she ever been rude? But how would you respond if someone called your momma a liar, stupid, self-centered, thoughtless and snarky. I hope you’d defend her! Then why is it so many “Jesus followers” tolerate it when people diss the church, the bride of Christ, and some of you guys even join in?!

Now I know, the church is not always a good mom. In fact, sometimes she’s flat out terrible! Many of you – many of us – have been wounded by the church (by other Jesus followers). In fact, for me (like for many of you), most of my deepest wounds were caused by the church (which means, by other messed up Jesus followers). And so, for some, Sunday mornings bring sadness, and anger.

Many have walked away from the church, and many more have been tempted to ... from time to time.

But last week I pointed out that there are no exception clauses to this “Honor your momma.” It doesn’t say, Honor your momma when she’s worthy, or Honor your momma when she treats you right, or Honor your momma when it feels right. It just says, Honor your momma. And I think that goes for honoring your spiritual momma too.

But there is another reason honoring your spiritual mom is hard, and I think this one may be even more insidious. You see, there is this ... creeping “consumer mentality” that is corrupting so many Jesus followers. “It’s about me! It’s about what I want, when I want it! It’s about what I like, when its convenient for me!” It has become a trendy idea, even more so over the past couple months: “Just Facebook it, just YouTube it, when it’s convenient for you! In your home, in your pajamas if you want.” How cool is that! Consumer Christianity! And we’re thinking, “And, after all, it’s not about the building, right? We are the church.” In fact, some people are thinking, “I can be perfectly fine without any in-person church, because I can worship and grow anywhere, right? And I can even connect and serve online, right?” “Besides it seems like every in-person church has all these issues. And this way I can connect with God and socially distance myself from all the messiness of an in-person church, right?”

Listen, guys, listen: The ultimate “consumerism” does not happen when a Jesus follower goes to church, it happens when he or she walks away from the gathering, the assembly, the congregation. The ultimate in “consumerism” for a Jesus follower is when he starts thinking, “I can worship God just fine by myself, my way, on my schedule, when its convenient for me.” Listen guys, this is huge: Listening to some podcast of your favorite preacher while you are on the sofa, or in the car, or at the gym, and listening to a collection of your favorite worship songs performed online does not grow you into a more passionate Jesus follower, just a less mature and a less effective one. Disconnecting from a messy ekklesia is way less faithful than connecting to flawed and messy one.

We Jesus followers have allowed ourselves to be “inconvenienced” for 2000 years. Jesus followers didn’t get to pick their own day and their own time to worship our God. We gathered on the Lord’s day, resurrection day, Sunday, when the collective of Jesus followers could get together make it work. And Sunday was a work-day back than! Being inconvenienced was the point! Worshiping our God together became our highest priority, way higher than other activities that we tend to push in front of the gathering.

And when we honor the church, we discover that, despite her flaws, and her faults, and her failures, the ekklesia of God is an amazing thing. You see, God didn’t dream up the church because he thinks it builds character to do something boring and tedious. God dreamed the church, and Jesus built the church, and the Holy Spirit empowers the church because healthy churches build healthy Jesus followers.

- They help us re-center on God each week. It’s so easy to get distracted, isn’t it? We get “distracted” by our jobs, by our recreation, by our problems. And “church” helps us refocus on God, which keeps everything else in perspective.
- And the church helps us face life’s problems ... and there will be a boatload of them. When we are young, we tend to think we are smart enough, and strong enough, and good enough to go it alone. Then life happens. Guys, we need each other. We need a physical family, and we need a spiritual family. We drag each other to heaven.
- Guys, we are simply stronger, and more effective as Jesus followers when we do it together. If you are a Jesus follower you are on a mission from God – to bring people face to face with

Jesus, and to help each other grow into Christ-Driven 24-7 Jesus followers. And we are stronger together! Guys, the one who wants you separated from the ekklesia the most is our enemy. Because the more isolated you are, the less effective you are.

So, Honor your spiritual Father – God, and Honor your spiritual mother – the church. How? This is a weird time! It was a weird Mother's Day last week, and it's a weird spiritual Mother's Day today.

- We can Facebook and we can YouTube, we can kind of connect that way. That's kind of cool. But I hope it's not your new normal. Online church cannot replace the hugs.
- You can do a drive by of the church and honk and wave. That's cool, I guess. But I hope you are looking forward to way more!
- What we are trying to do is pretty good. What we are planning to do, starting next week, is way better!

So ...

- Keep praying for the church ... please. Keep praying for each other, and keep praying for all the other assemblies of Jesus follows, in our town, in our state, in our world. This is a difficult time for the church!
- Keep connecting, as best you can. If you don't know how, give us a call and we'll help plug you in.
- Keep growing, as best you can. I hope you are spending some time with God alone, developing your own personal relationship with God. I also hope you are taking advantage of the amazing opportunities to grow in your understanding of our amazing God. Right Now media, our online devos, and our online classes.
- And keep serving, as best you can. Keep looking for ways to take care of each other, and love on each other. Some of the stories I'm hearing are amazing. By the way, we're going to start telling those stories, so please keep us in the loop!
- And guys, get ready to come back. Our physical re-launch will be next week, and I am really excited. And I know, some of you guys aren't ready yet – that's okay. Keep connecting online. And some of you guys really need to be careful, especially if you are in one of those high-risk groups. Just keep connecting online. But when you can, please ... come home, and drag someone with you! We have a job to do, and it's really hard to get it done when all we've got is online church. So, we're looking forward to getting it done again!