

Malcolm Clemens Young
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Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA Y18, V16
7 Easter (Year B) 8:30 a.m. and 11:00 a.m. Eucharist
Sunday 13 May 2018 Mother's Day

Acts 1:15-17, 21-

Psalm 1
1 John 5: 9-13
John 17: 6-19

Truth about Mothering

"I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves" (John 17).

1. In this our cathedral's year of truth, I have been thinking so much about mothering and motherhood. I am grateful for the holiness I see in the mothers I know. Lately life has conspired to give me many opportunities to appreciate the skill required to intimately care for, and lovingly shaping, another human being.

At the same time Mother's Day raises unique spiritual challenges. In this great Cathedral some of us badly wanted to have children, or a different form of family life, but were unable to. Some are in the trenches with two year olds and may not be particularly enjoying motherhood right now. Others had adoptions fall through, miscarriages, or recently lost a child. Some of us have contentious or difficult relationships with our children or mothers. Some here are still mourning our mother's death.

One Mother's Day, I had a conversation with an extraordinary friend. She shared her agony over not knowing where her son was or where he would sleep that night because of his addictions.

These are the stories you may not think of or hear on Mother's Day. I bring them up to remind us of the spiritual complexities that lie beneath the surface of every life. We will not all have the privilege and challenge of being mothers. But we do have the chance to care for, "to mother" if you will, another person. I do not know how God is calling us to do this but we might consider it as our homework.

Our gospel today comes from Jesus' farewell address to his friends. He says goodbye as a kind of spiritual mother. He offers a word of hope, a reminder that God's spirit protects us. But he also assigns us a responsibility for the world. Jesus prays, "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world" (Jn. 17).¹

Motherhood is not merely a personal matter. Mothering happens or fails to happen at a social level too. This week at a speech in Arizona, Attorney General Jeff Sessions

declared that it is the official policy of our government to separate children from their families if they cross the border without papers.² This is not the only sign of a tragic failure to care for children. On Tuesday the president's office proposed cutting \$7 billion from the Children's Health Insurance Program.³

2. Russell Banks (1940-) one of the greatest living American novelists has had a special interest in the way adults manipulate children for our own purposes. This morning I will talk about how I both agree and disagree with him. You may have read Banks' books or seen the movies based on them. They include: *Continental Drift* (1985), *Affliction* (1989), *The Sweet Hereafter* (1991), *Rule of the Bone* (1995), *Cloudsplitter* (1998) and others. Although I read his book *The Sweet Hereafter* twenty-four years ago, it still remains vividly with me. In this story of a small town in New York State a catastrophic school bus accident leads its citizens fight over a class action lawsuit. It shows how adult greed so easily leads to the exploitation of children.

A few years ago at Harvard Divinity School Banks gave the Ingersoll Lecture on Immortality.⁴ He follows in the footsteps of the philosophers William James and Josiah Royce, the theologian Paul Tillich, the scientist Stephen Jay Gould and most recently the novelist Toni Morrison.

Banks is an atheist with a great heart for people's suffering. For him the fundamentalist faith of his mother is merely a fantasy. The truth of the world lies in a struggle of all against all, as people who have been hurt unthinkingly lash out and harm others. He points out that at their heart all stories are about the present. Historical fiction is merely our code of values projected onto the past. Stories about the future really are about our present anxieties. For Banks death is like this too. He keeps it at arms length.⁵

For Banks the only kind of immortality is one that we experience in the present. He opposes this to what he calls a Woody Allen kind of immortality. Woody Allen says, "I don't want to achieve immortality through my work; I want to achieve immortality by not dying. I don't want to live on in the hearts of my countrymen. I want to live on in my apartment."

In contrast to this, Banks refers to a thought experiment by the philosopher Samuel Scheffler.⁶ Imagine if you knew that within thirty years after your death the world and all of humanity were to be utterly destroyed. Scheffler points out that this would fundamentally change how we think and how we behave. For instance, would cancer researchers dedicate their lives to this task with the same enthusiasm? Would we have constructed the new Bay Bridge or this Cathedral? In this way Scheffler reminds us that

we are working together on long term projects that we expect to bear fruit after we are gone.

For Russell Banks Scheffler's story about the future has enormous meaning to the present. The only immortality for him is the way our genes, culture and stories live on in our children. For him children are the afterlife.

But instead of allowing children to flourish for their own purposes we persist on using children to serve our needs. Our culture depersonalizes, objectifies, and commodifies children. Comparing the ancient practice of child sacrifice to modern capitalism, Russell Banks solemnly quotes the Book of Leviticus. "You shall not give any of your offspring to sacrifice them to Molech..." (Lev. 18:21).⁷

Banks mentions changes in our court system that make children more likely to be treated as adults, that focus on retribution rather than rehabilitation. He also could have added the huge number of children in poverty with no access to good education.⁸

Banks hardly mentioned the way teenagers have their childhoods snatched from them through adult expectations about college.⁹ Oddly enough learning and creativity are no longer the emphasis in our schools. Through standardized tests and curricula, relentless focus on competition, year-round sports, we communicate an unwavering message that children are made acceptable only by their accomplishments. In Palo Alto and across the country our children are dying metaphorically and literally because of the stories we are telling them, because it is not enough for them to simply be themselves.

Mostly though Banks refers to the deluge of advertising that colonizes our children's consciousness. Banks calls the powerful force of materialism Moloch, after the idol in the Hebrew Scriptures.

In his poem "Howl" Alan Ginsberg says, "Moloch whose mind is pure machinery! Moloch whose blood is running money!... Moloch whose soul is electricity and banks!... Moloch who entered my soul early! Moloch in whom I am a consciousness without a body!"¹⁰ Like the characters in the movie *The Matrix* we increasingly float through an unreal existence with our minds tethered to the machine.

At Grace Cathedral and Cathedral School we help children and their parents to resist Moloch. The openness and exploratory quality of childhood is very much alive here six days a week.

Russell Banks and I agree about the threat of Moloch to our children.¹¹ But for me real life is not like one of his novels. We do not inhabit a bleak, dead world characterized chiefly by everyone exploiting everyone else. Although we fall short of our own expectations and we do not always take in its beauty, we inhabit a living universe in which all things declare the glory of God. Life is not merely a dead-end cul-de-sac in which we race toward certain destruction, but an existence in which we constantly move more deeply into the divine reality as we grow into our potential as children of God.

Russell Banks reminds me how hard it is to live without meaning. This is true not just from an individual psychological perspective. It is hard intellectually. Meaning, even a kind of hopefulness, is a gift we receive from God. For most people it does not make sense to regard ourselves merely as individuals interested only in our own survival, sensual pleasure and well-being. This is because we are fundamentally connected to all creation.

This world is our home. We are invested in it. We want it to flourish even long after we are gone. We might even imagine wanting to live forever in our own apartment. We care about species of animals that we will never see. Our minds reach into the farthest depths of the universe out of a longing that we hardly understand. Russell Banks feels disappointed because he too at some level of his being has an oddly persistent sense that the universe should be full of meaning. For me, this feeling is a kind of voice drawing us home to God.

This brings us back to Jesus' last prayer. My friend, the New Testament scholar Herman Waetjen says its purpose is to convey the "awesome intimacy" with God which Jesus gives to us.¹² Jesus speaks in the second person singular to the creator of all things. He asks God to, "protect [us] from the evil one," the one we know as Moloch. We are all God's children. Jesus says we that do not "belong to the world" of exploitation and hatred. He prays that we will be sanctified in truth.

You and I face many choices about how to think and what to do. But we are not left alone or without hope. The love of Jesus brings us home to God. When we walk in Jesus' path, we discover that the world is being healed by the creator of mothers and of all good things.

Let us pray: Gracious God, you formed us in the depths beneath our mother's hearts. You know us from the inside out. Help us to care for the children and to fill the world with kindness and love. We ask this so that Jesus' joy may be made complete in us. Amen.

¹ This morning we also have Jesus' last words for his disciples in a prayer from the Gospel of John. The Bible actually has many farewell discourses like this from Jacob (Gen. 47:29-49:33), Joshua (Jos. 22-24), David (1 Chr. 27-29), Moses (Deut. 33), Tobit (Tob 14:3-11), and Paul (Acts 20:17-38). This biblical genre features an announcement about a person's departure, a statement about God's great works, a reminder of God's commands, instructions to love each other and concludes with a prayer.

² He said, "If you are smuggling a child, then we will prosecute you and that child will be separated from you as required by law. If you don't like that, then don't smuggle children over our border." Attorney General Sessions Delivers Remarks to the Association of State Criminal Investigative Agencies 2018 Spring Conference, Scottsdale, AZ, Monday, May 7, 2018. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/speech/attorney-general-sessions-delivers-remarks-association-state-criminal-investigative>

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/05/usa-routine-separation-of-asylum-seeking-families-violates-international-law/>

<https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/5/8/17327512/sessions-illegal-immigration-border-asylum-families>

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-immigration-children/u-s-cements-plans-to-separate-families-crossing-border-illegally-idUSKBN1I82AB>

³ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/congress-leery-of-trumps-cuts-to-childrens-health-program-1525822614>

⁴ Russell Banks, "Feeding Moloch: The Sacrifice of Children on the Altar of Capitalism," Harvard Divinity School Ingersoll Lecture, 5 November 2015. <http://hds.harvard.edu/news/2014/11/05feeding-moloch-sacrifice-children-altar-capitalism>

⁵ Parenthetically he notes that there are two types of science fiction. Stories where they go here and ones where we go there. In either case these are stories about us right now. Banks seems to agree with the Greek philosopher Epicurus (341-270 BC) who uses the following logic to reason that death should mean nothing to us. When we are alive we cannot experience death and when we are dead we cannot experience anything.

⁶ "A Philosopher's Afterlife: We May Die But Others Live On," *National Public Radio*, 9 October 2013. <http://www.npr.org/2013/10/09/230756192/a-philosophers-afterlife-we-may-die-but-others-live-on>

⁷ Any of the people... who give any of their offspring to Molech shall be put to death..." Lev. 20:2.

⁸ The way marketers treat children as the largest market category. Through television, Disney, Facebook, Twitter, EBay, Amazon, on cell phones and tablets the vast colossus reaches out and colonizes the consciousness of our children. Children become transformed into consumers.

⁹ Tom Little and Katherine Ellison, *Loving Learning: How Progressive Education Can Save America's Schools* (NY: Norton, 2015).

¹⁰ Alan Ginsberg, "Howl." <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/179381>

¹¹ This is the impersonal force of greed that lead us to treat people as tools for our pleasure rather than as ends in themselves. We agree that this is most heartbreaking when it comes to the children of the world. Beneath Russell Banks' words and thoughts lies a profound disappointment with the universe. His weak solution is that writers and musicians in each succeeding generation will reintroduce us to our true nature.

¹² Herman Waetjen, *The Gospel of the Beloved Disciple: A Work in Two Editions* (New York: T & T Clark, 2005) 367-77.