**Isaiah 66:10,12,13** July 28, 2019

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*Today’s sermon reading will be read a few paragraphs into the sermon.*

**CHURCH =** **A Loving Mother;
CHURCH = Thankful Children**

Dear Friends in Christ,

 Last week at the beginning of the sermon I told you about a teacher at my high school. This week I’m still thinking about school. Must be the time of year. July is almost over. Shopping for school is underway (well, admittedly that is my wife, not me.) This past week’s unusually cool weather made it feel like early September. School is in the air.

 As a topic of conversation, adults often ask children what their favorite subject is. Do you ever ask what a kid’s *least* favorite subject is? Watch the nose crinkle, the mouth turn sour. History? Math? A fair number, especially teenage boys, answer, “English.” If English was your least favorite, I know what you mean. You wished those writers would just say in plain words what everyone could understand. But these authors—and the poets are the worst—they write all kinds of stuff in big words in strange picture language that you can’t make heads or tails of. I mean, what does “As this pale taper’s earthly spark to yonder argent round…” mean? You can understand people in Bangladesh better than English poetry! Then you got bad grades because you couldn’t understand what they couldn’t put down in simple language. It was hardly your fault.

 Our short Bible reading today has a little bit of that in it. It is Hebrew poetry. So before we read it, I need to explain it just a bit.

 First of all, our reading speaks of “Jerusalem.” Contrary to what any plain spoken person might think, when our reading says “Jerusalem” is not talking about a certain Israeli city located at 32°north latitude 35°east longitude. “Jerusalem” here is a symbol for the whole group of God’s people, his believers as a group, what we sometimes call “The Church.”

 Second, these words contain “personification.” Personification is when you take something that isn’t living and you describe it like a person. For example, “Fame is a hard master,” or “The spring flowers danced in the breeze”—those are personification. Personification makes lifeless things touch something human in our souls.

 In religious things, personification can be helpful. If I talk about “The Church,” that gives you the feeling of an institution, something solid but unfeeling, something impersonal. God, in our reading in Isaiah, personifies God’s Church as a woman, and not just any woman, but as your mother. The one who first held you in her arms. The one whose face you stared at for the first how many weeks of your life, whose skirt you clung to when uncertainty whirled around you, the one… well, here I get ahead of myself. Keep those two things in mind: that definition of Jerusalem and personification when I read to you the Word of God we consider today:

 *Isaiah 66:10“Rejoice with Jerusalem and be glad for her, all you who love her; rejoice greatly with her, all you who mourn over her…” 12For this is what the Lord says: “I will extend peace to her like a river, and the wealth of nations like a flooding stream; you will nurse and be carried on her arm and dandled on her knees. 13As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you; and you will be comforted over Jerusalem.”*

**I. God’s Church – A Loving Mother**

 After I read this a few times I wished that I had chosen this for a Mother’s Day sermon! All that is good and right about mothers is there: their selflessness, their living for another, the comfort they sincerely give, all of it. God’s Church is described as your mother.

 The Church is the great cloud of Jesus’ believing people around you here, and in your past, and when you visit another Christian congregation in another state. “The Church” is all believers in Jesus Christ, everywhere, of all time. About the Church God says in verse 12, ***“I will extend peace to her like a river.”***

God is gracious to his Church. God gives to his Church as a whole the gift of the forgiveness of sins which it/they have the right to announce to every repentant believer in Jesus Christ. God give his Church the sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion. God extends peace to his people through the word of peace, the Bible. These are the tools God has given his church to give and build up faith in Christ Jesus. God gives the church a blood-bought peace between God and humanity. A peace which should be seen in it, like a wide, powerful, yet peaceful river.

 God’s Church blessed by so many blessings, cares for her children. Pay special attention to these words spoken to the individual believer in relation to his Mother Church: ***“You will nurse and be carried on her arm and dandled on her knees.”*** Three things there: you will nurse, you will be carried or her arm and finally you will be dandled on her knees. Now I don’t want to overanalyze here, but each of those three beautiful pictures of a mother with her child is worth considering!

 The first, ***“You will nurse”*** is the sort of thing our world has lost the significance of. Here I try to maintain proper decorum, but what God is telling us is something that I need to communicate to you. It is now, and has been for nearly a century now, a mother’s choice whether to feed an newborn baby with formula or naturally. It didn’t used to be that way. Go to the poorest regions of our world and it still isn’t a choice. Live in those parts of the world a while and you will realize that a mother *needs* to naturally nurse her children *well*. It is a matter of life and death. And if life, whether that child will flourish or be sickly. It those circumstances it is a tremendous stress on a new mother, hoping that she will be able to provide what her child needs, worried that if she doesn’t, that precious child will die. Die. I’ve seen it. I’ve buried them. It’s not that she was selfish or uncaring or neglectful, it is just, well, she can’t do any better. There is hardly a sadder place in this world than where she is. To people living lives where childbirth was only the beginning of a child’s perils, to people who probably knew a childhood mortality rate of 20-30%, God speaks through Isaiah. Isaiah says to God’s people about Jerusalem, about the Church, about the family of believers who gather around you on Sunday, about the people you step forward to receive communion with, about the people who witnessed the baptism of your children, about that/this great body of believers, God said, ***“You will nurse.”*** God has given life-giving blessings through his Church. He promises that it’s blessings will always be abundant, never insufficient.

 Second picture: ***“You will be carried on her arm.”*** Here our translation of the Bible does us a disservice. It is correct, but it misses an endearing picture. The picture is more like ***“You will be carried on her hip.”*** Again, think into the past. Baby strollers and car carriers didn’t exist. A young mother grabs junior off the floor, under his arms, swings him around and perches him on her hip and carries him around the house, to the kitchen, to do the chores. The mother, especially a young first time mother, wouldn’t dream of leaving that little guy out of sight. Every time she moves she picks the little one up, slaps her on her hip and carries her to the next duty station. Child and mother, together always.

 Third: ***“You will be dandled on her knees.”*** It’s not all work with mothers and their little ones. Mother takes a break from her work. She sits down, puts the little one on her knees facing her, bounces him, looks him in the face and smiles. You’ve seen it: the games, the nursery rhymes, mother and child cooing back and forth, laughing, sitting on her knees.

 Mother giving life, continual watchfulness, and having fun with her dearest little treasure in this world. It is God’s picture of what God’s Church is to be to its people. Church is not just brick and mortar, not just attendance rosters and church budgets. A mother and child. A child dependent on a mother, a mother vitally concerned for her child.

 Which makes me almost cry when it drops from people’s lips, (and I heard it again this week from a woman,) “I left the church because of all the hypocrites.” She wasn’t a former member here. She was from elsewhere, of another group of believers. I’m not sure that her judgment was entirely fair, but I don’t doubt that she had a reason for saying and feeling what she did.

 How sad it is when the Church is not a mother to her children. What mother does not worry about a six-month old who catches a cold? What mother doesn’t call the neighbors when a twelve year old doesn’t show up for supper? What mother, in front of other parents, puts down her own children, speaking the worst of them? Oh yes, there are mothers like that out there—and you know what you think of them! God’s Church is often unfairly judged, but God’s Church—we—need to honestly ask ourselves if we are the loving mother pictured here in Isaiah. Have we been God’s channel of blessing to God’s people. Giving life, intimately concerned? Are we concerned enough to do something about those not here? Are you praying for the sick (I mean actually folding the hands, closing the eyes praying for them)? Are we willing, like a mother, to put ourselves out for our church’s family? Do we want to make sure that *each* of God’s children is cared for? In the words of Isaiah, this is what the Mother Church does.

 Thank God that he continues to ***“extend peace like a river”*** to us. Thank God that he continually offers the forgiveness of sins through faith in Jesus Christ. Thank God that he promises, ***“As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you.”*** God knows that his Church is not perfect, but he loves her, and he extends peace to her.

**II. God’s People – Appreciative Children**

 The reading began, however, not with the mother but with the children, with you and me as individuals, as children of the Mother Church.

 A loving earthly mother blesses us in ways we can never repay, but that doesn’t mean we don’t try. We have a mighty low opinion of ungrateful children as about the worst people out there. If you want to describe the most selfish and self-centered person you have ever met, what is it you say? Something like, “He would knock his own mother down to get to the front of the line.” No, no. That’s not the way it is supposed to be.

 Quite the opposite. Who is it that the football players say “Hi” to when the camera shifts to the sideline? You know it! What is the one holiday of the year left that we can all still pretty much agree to celebrate without protests? Yes, that second Sunday of May! Children blessed with good mothers are concerned about them. As children mature and age, they want to hear that their mothers are well and prospering, taken care of and with few worries. They visit them, call them, if need be send them money, even ask them to move closer. Your mother is your concern, and one of the few you never begrudge. When she is happy and content, it adds to your happiness and contentment just because she is.

 The first verse of our reading encourages us, ***“Rejoice with Jerusalem and be glad for her all you who love her.”*** We concern ourselves with the worldwide Church, and our own local church. Our joy is to see it prosper. Not simply like basketball fans who watch a televised game, whose viewership, when it comes right down to it, really doesn’t matter. We aren’t mere fans of the Christian Church. We are members of it. We are spiritual children concerned for the welfare of our spiritual mother.

 We contribute toward it. We rejoice over its victories. We find a way to take part in its ministries. (Please note of some of people in the bulletin announcements who have recently volunteered their time to our Mother’s needs.) That’s what good children of good mothers do. That’s the picture our reading puts in front of us.

 What is the Church? **CHURCH =** **A Loving Mother;
CHURCH = Thankful Children.** Amen.