

# *“Mothers of Compassion”*

## **A Sermon for Mother’s Day**

**Preached by Pastor Rob Fulton**

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**First United Presbyterian Church  
Bellefontaine, Ohio**

I can remember like it was just YESTERDAY the first time I heard the story about wise King Solomon who was about to cut that baby in two. I was sitting in Mary Lou Lacy’s Sunday School class in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, listening with wide-eyed wonder, just holding my breath to see if the King would really divide the child and give half to each mother. Would a wise king really DO that? Even at the tender young age of 8, I knew that that would KILL the baby and all those mothers would have then was HALF a dead baby. And if dumb little old ME knew that, then why in the world didn’t wise King SOLOMON know that?!

Ah yes! WISE King Solomon! Of course now, Solomon DIDN’T cut the baby in half, and never really INTENDED to. But what a JUDICIOUS decision he made in order to figure out a solution to the seemingly IMPOSSIBLE situation of two mothers making claim to the same baby. Ever since this story first told, of course, we too have prayed for the proverbial “wisdom of Solomon” when we are faced with a seemingly impossible conflict that must be decided. Solomon’s WISDOM, to be sure, is LEGENDARY!

And yet, contemporary theologian and Bible scholar Phyllis Trible, has suggested that despite our focus on and admiration for Solomon’s WISDOM in this story, we have often times failed to grasp what this story is REALLY all about. Finally and ultimately, Trible says, this is not so much a story about Solomon’s WISDOM, as it is a story about a MOTHER’S COMPASSION...COMPASSION that, finally and ultimately, reflects the heart of God...and offers us an important glimpse into who and what God is calling US to be as God’s people.

So let’s take a closer look at the story and see if we can understand this COMPASSION thing that Ms. Trible says is so important.

Now, immediately after telling about Solomon praying for...and God granting him wisdom, the story tells us about two women...two prostitutes...who come before the King in order for him to settle a dispute between them...for back in those days, you see, one of the King’s primary responsibilities...among many others...was to solve arguments among his people. Even the most “common” of people could come to the King to have their cases decided...for the king was not only the Common Pleas Court, but the Supreme Court, Judge and Jury all wrapped up in one. So the women came before Solomon to settle their dispute.

Both women you see...lived in the same house...and both had baby boys within days of each other. Well, one night, while they were sleeping, one of the women – and notice very carefully here that the storyteller, at this point, is referring to these two characters not as “mothers” but only as “women”...that’s all. The use of the term “mother” only comes later.

Well, while they were sleeping, one of the women rolled over on her son and smothered him. When she discovered what had happened, instead of waking the other women and telling her about the tragedy, she simply took her dead son and put him in bed with the other women while taking the other’s woman’s living son and put him in bed with her. The next morning, the second woman awoke and discovered that the baby in bed with her was dead and she was grief-stricken. But looking more closely, she quickly determined that the dead baby was not her son at all, but the OTHER woman’s son. The first woman however claimed that the LIVING child was hers and not the dead one. But the second woman continued to argue that no, the living child was HER’S and the dead child belonged to the first woman. And so they argued back and forth...back and

forth...eventually taking the case to the highest court in the land...the court of King Solomon, himself.

The King, seeing that with no witnesses to testify, the argument basically boiled down to one woman's word against the other, offered a solution. *"Since you can't decide,"* the King proposed, *"let's just cut the baby in two and give each of you a half of the child."*

Well, with that, the REAL mother...that title now being used for the very first time...the REAL mother's heart was so filled with COMPASSION that she screamed out in terror for what was about to happen to her baby boy. *"NO! NO!"* she cried. *"Please sir, don't kill the child. I'd rather you give him over to the OTHER woman than to have him cut in two."*

But the OTHER woman...still being called only "woman" and not "mother" for she had no compassion...said coldly, *"What do I care. Go ahead and cut the child in half. See if it matters to me!"*

Well, seeing the compassion of the REAL mother, the storyteller tells us, Solomon ALSO had compassion, and awarded the child solely to her, while the first woman went away childless.

And so it is, theologian Tribble tells us, that the criteria of COMPASSION is established as the motivating factor for who IS and who ISN'T a mother after the heart of God. For it was precisely at the moment when COMPASSION appeared, that the title "mother" was first used and Solomon's wisdom KNEW to whom he should award the child. It was all because of COMPASSION – not just a *"feeling for"* another person...but a *"feeling with"* another person. Not just *"taking pity"* on someone in an unfortunate situation...but a *"taking action"* on behalf of that other person so as to make a DIFFERENCE in that other person's life...so as to seek what is BEST for that other person's life. Which is EXACTLY what that MOTHER of Compassion did for her son in our story this morning...having such COMPASSION for him that she was even willing to give him over to another woman rather than risk losing him for good...a COMPASSION, theologian Phyllis Tribble suggests to us, which reflects the ultimate COMPASSION of God. For over and over and over again, she reminds us, the scriptures talk about the COMPASSION of God – God's CONCERN...God's KINDNESS...God's CARING...God's seeking of the BEST for God's people – COMPASSION as a mother has COMPASSION for her children.

Through the Prophet Hosea, God spoke:

When Israel was a child, I loved him,  
And out of Egypt, I called my son.  
But the more I called him, the more he went away from me.  
Yet it was I who taught Israel to walk,  
I took him in him in my arms and comforted him, like a mother comforts her child.  
I drew him close to me and held him in mercy and love.  
I was like a mother who lifts her infant to her breast.  
With COMPASSION, I bent down and fed him.  
How can I give you up, O Israel?  
How can I hand you over to another?  
My compassion grows warm and tender.  
And my heart will not let you go.

Hosea 11:1-4, 8

And echoing God's Word through the Prophet, the Psalmist also sings the refrain:

The Lord is merciful and gracious, full of COMPASSION.  
Like a mother who loves her children,  
So also does God love and protect, seeking the best for God's people.

Psalm 116:5 (paraphrased)

Even Jesus, in the New Testament, describes God as a COMPASSIONATE parent who lovingly waits for his wayward son to return home:

And while the boy was still a long way off, the Father saw him  
and his heart was filled with COMPASSION. And running to meet  
his son he threw his arms around him and hugged him and kissed  
him, weeping for joy at the boy's return! Luke 15:20 (paraphrase)

THAT, Jesus tells us, is what God is like...a God of COMPASSION... the very root word of which comes from the Hebrew word for “womb”...that place where life itself is conceived and is nurtured in love and in mercy...in other words, in COMPASSION!

Are the parallels not obvious? The Old Testament storyteller grants the honored and revered title of “MOTHER” to the woman in the story ONLY when she shows COMPASSION...even as Jesus, the NEW Testament storyteller, tells us about our Father God who is so COMPASSIONATE that he cannot HELP but welcome his wayward children home again.

All of which has, I think, some exceedingly clear and important implications for who and what WE are called to BE and DO in our modern day world – whether we are MOTHERS...or FATHERS...or NEITHER, but simply children of God and followers of our Lord Jesus Christ. And that is that we are ALL called to be PEOPLE OF COMPASSION...not just people who take PITY on those less fortunate than we are...not just those who SYMPATHIZE with the down and out...but people who will ACT out of COMPASSION to make a difference in another person’s life.

COMPASSION, good friends and beloved of the Lord, is the very WOMB OF LIFE – that warm and safe place where life, as God intends for life to be, is conceived, nurtured and grows...in other words, where life is “mothered” in the very best sense of the word. Which, as strange as it may sound, gives us ALL...every single ONE of us...women AND men, girls AND boys, young AND old...the ability to be “MOTHERS”...BIBLICAL mothers...GODLY mothers – conceiving, nurturing, growing a life of blessing within the “womb” of our compassion.

Now today, of course, is MOTHER’S DAY...a day set aside to honor our mothers and the good and Godly virtues of motherhood. And rightly so. We are responding to our natural inclination to remember and appreciate our earthly mothers who conceived and nurtured us and brought us forth into life. So THANK YOU MOM, wherever you may be!

But today is ALSO day to remember and recognize the ability God has given EACH of us...ALL of us...to nurture LIFE in the womb of our COMPASSION...compassion we are called, in Christ’s name, to show toward ALL God’s people.

So God bless ALL Godly mothers, whoever you may be! And God bless us the REST of us too – that from the wombs of our COMPASSION and LOVE, we may truly bring forth the life God intends for each and every person to know – forgiven life...renewed life...life of hope and promise lived out in the nurturing reality of both GOD’S compassion...and OUR’S as well.

Will you join me in prayer:

Gracious and loving God, you are like a strong, yet gentle mother toward us, your children!

In the inner most regions of your Holy Being, we were conceived

and given the uniqueness that is ours along!

You brought us forth into the world and breathed the breath of life into us!

As with a mother’s tender, yet steady hand, you have guided and nurtured us  
along the pathways of our lives.

For being who you are, Creator God, we give you thanks!

For give birth to us and caring for us with compassion throughout our lives,  
we praise your Holy Name!

We thank you also, Loving God, for the gift of mothers who reflect,  
even imperfectly, the qualities of mercy, kindness, gentleness,  
patience, strength and compassion you show toward us,  
your children each and every day.

Guide and bless all mothers, Gracious Lord,

that along with fathers and all people of faith,

we may fulfill your calling to be people of compassion in all that we do

Fill us with such faith and trust in your that we may live your compassion,

that in living your compassion, we may lead others toward a loving relationship with him  
who is your Son, even Jesus, the Christ, the Lord of ALL compassion.

In His Holy Name we pray, Amen!

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