

## REFLECTIONS ON MOTHERHOOD AND LEADERSHIP

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### *Introduction*

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I am honored by invitation to be a guest editor for this collection of theological reflections on motherhood and leadership in the spaces of ministry and the academy. In this collection, as a reader, you are invited on a journey to witness theology in sacred spaces. “*Where* exactly am I invited?” you may ask. You are invited into the homes, parishes, and classrooms of women mothering children and leading congregations and teaching students. You are invited as witnesses to theology as it happens in the sacred spaces of chaos and crying, birthing and nurturing, pastoring and teaching. Ask any mother how she does it and she may hesitate to respond. These spaces are complex, vulnerable, and *sacred* to navigate.

As I reflect on these pieces, I am reminded that the most sacred spaces in the biblical story are unexpected. They are unexpected in that they happen in the everydayness of living life. For Moses, he was scanning the countryside, watching the flock on a regular workday, when he hears the voice of YHWH from the bush that refused to be consumed by flames, “Moses! Moses!” (Exodus 3:4). He is called to become a liberator of an oppressed people. Moses is remembered as one of the most significant individuals in the Pentateuch. A pregnant Mary journeys to Bethlehem with Joseph at a very inconvenient time for her body (Luke 2:4-7). She gives birth to Jesus and places him in a manger. Unexpected, everyday places becoming sacred. Difficult spaces of grief hold the possibility for the holy. As Jesus is grieving the death of Lazarus, Martha speaks a frank word to him in her own grief, “If you had been here...” (John 11:21a). Jesus did not just pastor those around him because it was his job, Jesus deeply loved them, and they loved Jesus in return. Some scholars suggest that Lazarus may have had a disability.<sup>1</sup> In my imagination with this possibility, Lazarus and the sisters, Mary and Martha, reveal hospitality in new ways. I can relate on personal levels when I think of those with disabilities in my own family. In this unexpected moment, Jesus enters the space of death and difficulty to bring hope and life. In this tomb of ending, Jesus speaks beginnings and resuscitates Lazarus. Sacred spaces in unexpected places.

For these contributors, the journey of motherhood has been unexpected (for some) and transformative (for all). It has become ground (*‘adamah*) where they see God in new ways, trust God in creative spaces, and formulate theology through the lens of motherhood. By this I mean, how God is understood amidst the “chaos,” “limitations,” “exhaustion,” and “challenges.” Life shapes our theology. I hope that as you read these reflections, your understanding of God may be expanded and centered on the particular in your own life. Sometimes our vision of God is expanded when it encounters the demanding everydayness of our lives. If asked, “where is God in this place?” the surprise is that God is found in every space, even in the “chaos,” “limitations,” “exhaustion,” and “challenges” . . . and new spaces of “grace.” You are invited on a journey to

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<sup>1</sup> Scholars have pondered if Mary and Martha were his possible caregivers because as an adult man, Lazarus lived with his sisters.

witness theology in sacred spaces. May this invitation bring you hope and encouragement that you are not alone as you navigate the complexities of your calling and vocations of leadership and family.

*A Call to See*

Karla Sanchez-Renfro

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*Introduction*

As a Latina leader in a multicultural church, I am learning to engage the work of pastor theologian in hopes of examining different ways of relating and engaging power.<sup>2</sup> I am also a mother of two. Unique to my story is that my oldest is my stepson. Our relationship has helped solidify that we are made to love regardless of our biological connection. Also, like many blended families, my oldest spent his childhood going back and forth between two homes. Co-parenting was a profoundly complex, vulnerable, and impactful dance. In addition to the dynamics of being a blended family, I am raising two sons of different ethnicities. Mothering in a mixed-race home has been a delicate journey. The details of my life have reinforced this simple truth: living well requires I slow down to pay attention to who is in front of me because love and wisdom are found in the nuances of life. Through following Jesus, parenting, pastoring or engaging in theology, I have come to trust that I participate best with what God is doing when I prioritize trying to see others.

*Leaning In to See In Love*

The goodness that flows from trying to see others with curiosity and openness should come as no surprise because being seen and loved are interconnected. While there are times we are left seeing others from a distance, opportunities may arise where the invitation to see entails intentionally coming close to another. Seeing another up close — looking them in the eye, respecting their individuality, honoring their place within a community, and hearing their story — is a privilege and gift. To see another authentically humanizes the person being seen and the seer.

Seeing is about proactively sharing space. When we work to see others with love and respect, we validate people's worth and demonstrate a desire to connect. Mildred Bangs Wynkoop elevates the power of personal relationships when she writes, "No more important message can be spoken than that personal sanctification should be expressed in terms of personal relationships. This takes precedence over methodology and understands the person-to-person

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<sup>2</sup> I was introduced to the term and vision of pastor theologian from Gerald Hiestand and Todd Wilson's book *Pastor Theologian: Resurrecting An Ancient Vision*. (Full publication details in bibliography.)

reality central in all aspects of Christian experience.”<sup>3</sup> Seeing is about understanding there is no them-versus-us. So when we see others, we tell them we are with them and for them.

### *Surrender*

Seeing through the lens of curiosity and openness requires we learn to relinquish control and embrace a posture of intentional surrender. Seeing in love is not about figuring people out so we can get our way. As Bangs Wynkoop teaches, “love can exist only in freedom. It cannot be coerced. Freedom is the most fundamental ingredient of love.”<sup>4</sup> As humans, we are extensions of one another — we belong to each other — but we are our own people. Honoring the sacred space between connectedness and separateness is crucial to individual and relational health.

Part of what makes parenthood such a powerful and humbling teacher is how it continuously calls us to surrender. As parents, we repeatedly relinquish control but never because of apathy. Seeing entails respecting what is ours to manage and what we must entrust to another and God. We must care wholeheartedly while simultaneously honoring sacred boundaries because “love does not force its way; it invites and encourages and assists.”<sup>5</sup> Learning to discern what to surrender in each situation is holy work for any Christ follower, parent, pastor, and theologian.

Seeing with a commitment to surrender also entails making room for enduring differences. As Latina Evangélicas teach, “unity without differences is a theological oxymoron.”<sup>6</sup> Learning to live with people who see differently than us — while not denying our convictions or true self — is central to how we walk in love. As the body of Christ, we must be people who respect our “inherent many-ness in the essential one-ness.”<sup>7</sup> This means we must learn to pause and calmly proceed with care when we begin to jeopardize relationships due to disagreements. Seeing others in love invites us to trust that “unity does not depend upon intellectual unanimity... (but rather) the recognition of a common obligation to infinite love.”<sup>8</sup> We must learn to engage the relational and inner work disagreements bring to the surface.

### *Being Transformed*

When we embrace seeing others from this place of love and respect, we will be positioned to be transformed. God uses all of life — including relationships — to call us towards richer sanctification. Learning to lean into relationships with a posture of mutuality, thus creating a “discipleship of equals,” will cultivate spaces of growth and feedback, and nurture greater dignity for all.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Mildred Bangs Wynkoop, *A Theology of Love: The Dynamic of Wesleyanism* (Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, 2015), loc 2809 of 6287, Kindle Edition.

<sup>4</sup> Wynkoop, *A Theology of Love*, loc. 376 of 6287.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Lodahl, *Matthew Matters: The Yoke of Wisdom and the Church of Tomorrow* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2021), 143.

<sup>6</sup> Loida I. Martell-Otero, Zaida Maldonado Pérez, and Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, *Latina Evangélicas: A Theological Survey from the Margins* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2013), 57.

<sup>7</sup> Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile, *Participation in God’s Mission: A Theological Missiology for the Church in America* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2018), 34.

<sup>8</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *Missionary Theologian* (Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publish, 2006), 72.

<sup>9</sup> Letty M. Russell, *Church In the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993), 59.

This call to love despite differences also positions us to work creatively towards "new expressions of the Church...more faithful to the demands of the Gospel."<sup>10</sup> When we are shoulder to shoulder — in a community of equals — processing matters of life and faith, we engage in good theological work. Further, contextual theology understands that as Christ followers, we are not called to theorize about how love works but to live out a life of love. Latina Evangélicas use the term *una manera de ser y de creer* or a “way of being and believing” to describe a lived theology.<sup>11</sup> In the context of real life we are best positioned to see if our theology translates to love and how God is inviting us to move forward. This is a seeing that leads to interdependence and collaboration — with each other and the Spirit — to reveal the Kingdom of God here and now.

### *Seeing to Serve*

Furthermore and generally speaking, the more fully we can see each other, the better positioned we are to serve each other. Authentically knowing another person — their strengths and the areas of their life that need healing or growth — uniquely positions us to stand in solidarity with them as allies and co-laborers. From up close, we can better utilize wisdom, compassion, and resources. When we see people, we can parent and shepherd with greater care, and we can demonstrate how the gospel is intended to be "translated...into the particular and local."<sup>12</sup>

### *Conclusion*

We follow a God who sees us and meets us where we are, and He invites us to do the same with the people in our lives. As Christians, we get to receive God’s love as we are and contextualize love for others. And while we cannot force others to share their life with us, we are responsible for continuously working towards seeing because seeing is how we love and how we are equipped to live missionally.

More than this, our God is a God who sees the unseen. Scripture depicts a God who pays special attention to those with less power. This profoundly matters because as Brenda Salter McNeil teaches, “what we believe about God will tell us what we believe about people; and what we believe about people will tell us what kinds of communities and societies we believe we should strive to create.”<sup>13</sup> Therefore, as image bearers and people looking to be transformed and filled by God’s Spirit, may we intentionally work on seeing the unseen. All people deserve to be seen — we are *all* made to see in love and be seen in love.

Seeing others in love is a part of how we participate in God’s unfolding work. I know this firsthand as someone who is imperfectly but intentionally committed to seeing others and as someone who has experienced restoration through others leaning into my life with openness and curiosity. Being seen has empowered and emboldened my walk with Christ and my identity in

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<sup>10</sup> Elsa Tamez, *Through Her Eyes: Women's Theology from Latin America* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2006), 117, 152; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals: A Critical Feminist Ekklesia-logy of Liberation* (New York: The Crossroads, 1998), 288.

<sup>11</sup> Martell-Otero, Maldonado Pérez, and Conde-Frazier, *Latina Evangélicas*, 8.

<sup>12</sup> Van Gelder and Zscheile, *Participation in God’s Mission*, 39.

<sup>13</sup> Brenda Salter McNeil, *Roadmap to Reconciliation 2.0: Moving Communities into Unity, Wholeness and Justice* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 27.

Christ. Seeing and being seen helps us demonstrate that “the love of God is not an abstract ethical theory” — it is a love available to us here and now.<sup>14</sup> Practically speaking, when we can engage others with a desire to see, we communicate a sacred confidence that says: I know God is moving in your life, and I would like to witness that movement, and I know that His grace will move through our relationship in mutually life giving ways when I take the time to lean in. Seeing people is how we live the gospel.

*Motherhood & Ministry: A Synchronized Journey of Life*

Rev. Lisa Aparicio

*Lisa Aparicio does not claim scholarly expertise on ministry and motherhood, only lived experience as a mother of two young sons, one of whom is on the autism spectrum. In addition, she and her husband serve as co-lead pastors of a bi-lingual church. Lisa has also been co-vocational for the entirety of her time as an ordained elder, most recently serving as Ministry Development Coordinator for Nazarene Youth International.*

Motherhood and ministry have been synchronized journeys for me. I was granted my district license in 2014, the same year our first son was born. I gave birth to our second son in 2016 and was ordained in 2017. In 2018 my husband and I accepted the call to become lead pastors for the first time, and that same year our oldest son received his ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder) diagnosis.

Scripture reveals a God who takes an interest in the individual lives of God’s children. I have experienced this repeatedly in my life as God has expressed care for me as a mother by speaking to me through the lessons I was learning in ministry. God has also shaped my voice and priorities in ministry through my experiences as a mother. There should never be any doubt that God also meets those who are not parents in equally personal and transformational ways. This is not a conversation about one type of journey being better or more formative than another, but my journey is an example of how God meets us right where we are.

*Lessons from Birth*

As I shared above, I received my district license the same year our first son was born. I remember being *very* pregnant as I went into my interview with the Board of Ministry, not knowing I would give birth less than 48 hours later. In many ways, I began to feel like a mother from the moment I learned I was pregnant. Still, pregnancy ushers in a season of change as your body prepares to sustain the growth of a child. My priorities changed as a desire to protect and nurture the life growing and developing inside me took hold right away. Yet it wasn't until I began to get to know my son after he was born that this responsibility connected itself in a more personal way.

The journey of ministry is very similar. A deep sense of calling and direction comes alive when we respond to God’s call on our life. There is a season of growth and preparation as we change our plans and priorities in life. There are aspects of our lives that are laid bare for the important

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<sup>14</sup> Andrew Purves, *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology: A Christological Foundation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 37.

work of discernment and accountability. When we enter into the ordination process, we submit to the guidance and wisdom of the Church. Just like a mother doesn't know the full responsibility motherhood holds for her the moment her baby is placed in her arms, we can't know everything ministry holds for us as we follow God's call. (Luke 9:57-62). Nonetheless, both are types of calling that change us forever.

### *Lessons from Limitations*

Our second son was born in November, and my limitations very quickly became even more evident. We had a newborn who wanted to be held constantly and a two year old who couldn't fully decode the verbal explanations for all the changes in our family. Yet, nothing stopped me from ignoring my limitations or from accepting the guilt of falling short. However, two short months later when my father-in-law was in a coma, the limitations of life defiantly stood their ground. I came face-to-face with the reality that it was physically impossible to be fully present as a wife, mother, daughter-in-law, and pastor during those days. In that season, God used the ministry to care for me. Our pastor, his wife, and their kids all but moved into our home to help keep routines normal for our boys. The church surrounded us, brought meals, helped with our boys, and took as much off our plates as they could. We witnessed the body of Christ in action and at its best.

As much as we are taught to celebrate our independence, our Triune God did not create us to journey alone. Whether in ministry or in motherhood, we need others. We often see our limitations as a challenge to conquer, rather than an opportunity to invite others in. But it is okay to admit that I can't do it all on my own. It is okay to acknowledge our limitations and seek to live so that God's power can be made perfect in our weakness (2 Corinthians 12:1-10). We often want God to show up in our lives in disembodied ways because we'd rather not let others know about our limitations or our needs. Yet, God has commissioned the Church to be the body of Christ, living and active, willing to suffer and be honored together (1 Corinthians 12:21-31).

### *Lessons from Detours*

In 2018, my husband and I began to consider taking a break from the ministry. We were seeing the need for us to connect our oldest son with additional support to help him thrive. We could not see very far down the road, but we knew we needed to focus on our son and we were struggling to see how ministry would fit into that. We met with our District Superintendent to share our tentative plans for stepping away from ministry, but through him God led us to our next ministry assignment. By July of that year we had an official diagnosis for our son and we were being installed as co-lead pastors of a church, with a parsonage five minutes from a center providing one of the types of therapy we were seeking for our son.

There are many aspects of ministry and motherhood that have felt like detours. Serving as co-lead pastors has meant that we depend on people to help with our children at church more than I anticipated. Our oldest son's needs have brought concerns about care and accessibility into the forefront of ministry conversations, which in turn have helped us to understand the needs of other families as a church. Ministry requires attentiveness to the needs of those around us, a willingness to obey God no matter the cost, and humility to hear the wise counsel of those we journey with and those in leadership above us. Motherhood has made me more aware of each of those things. We do not often get to see very far down the road, and so we must walk in faith even along the detours (John 6:25-35).

*Midwife of the New Creation*  
Rev. Dr. Shawna Songer Gaines

*Mother to Callen (age 10) and Evalynne (age 9), Shawna pastors the Trevecca Community Church of the Nazarene in Nashville TN, where she and her husband Tim live and serve.*

When the Apostle Paul writes in Romans 8 that the whole creation is groaning in the pains of childbirth,<sup>15</sup> his words are moving and inspiring, not to mention so very missional to think of all creation groaning and joining the chorus of grunts and heavy breathing as new creation begins to crown. Still, I can't help but think, *what does Paul know about childbirth?!* He even tells the Galatians that he is in the pains of childbirth until they are formed in Christ.<sup>16</sup> Paul is a single man who writes about marriage as something useful only to ease the burn.<sup>17</sup> This is a surprising metaphor to capture Paul's pastoral imagination.

Metaphors can be a way of putting on someone else's work uniform for a while, and playing pretend in your own life. Paul loves to use them; taking an outfit from Exodus, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and wearing it into his pastoral ministry in Corinth, Ephesus or Rome. The preacher, the outfit, and the setting all combine for a new expression of contextual ministry.

The pastor as a shepherd is the primary metaphor I was taught to imagine pastoral ministry. After all, the term *pastor* is derived from *shepherd*. David was a knockout in that outfit but Jesus wore it best. I've tried to wear the shepherd uniform faithfully in the pulpit for many years, and it's worth keeping in my closet, although it's not very flattering to my figure.

Metaphors, like wardrobes, are necessarily limited. They are not meant to be all-encompassing. The preacher who over-extends a perfectly good metaphor deserves the eye-rolling they will receive. But when it comes to pastoring, our metaphors have been so limited it has been hard not to overextend this one. I worry that it has led us to consider the task of ministry as leading our dumb sheep to the streams of the waters of life, lest they die of thirst without us. Gather up the flock to follow the pastor who knows the way and has the seminary degree. Get in line or suffer the rod. One voice teaching our congregation how to keep away from the wolves and enjoy green pastures.

Paul used a birthing metaphor as he urges his brothers and sisters to bear the suffering of this present time, embodying Christ while waiting for new creation, like a woman birthing a child into this world. He seems willing to put aside the more common metaphor for pastoral ministry and try on a new outfit, even if it's not as comfortable to him at first. In this metaphors Paul is echoing a story he knows quite well.

In the Exodus story the people of God are in bondage, much like all of creation, in the land of Egypt. Their baby boys, the new life and future hope of Israel, are under threat. They need deliverance. At some point the Hebrew people will need a shepherd, *but right now they need a deliverer*. And not the one who kills an Egyptian and tries to run from his calling, but the ones who would deliver even this deliverer.

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<sup>15</sup> Romans 8:22 NRSV

<sup>16</sup> Galatians 4:19 NRSV

<sup>17</sup> 1 Corinthians 7:8-9 NRSV

The story of Shiphrah and Puah, the Hebrew midwives in Exodus chapter one, is one of my favorites. In this story, the Hebrew people are crying out to God for rescue. During this time, the midwives are tending to the mothers who are crying out in the pain of new birth, helping them to deliver babies into the world and out of the hands of Pharaoh. There is an agonizing hopefulness in the story of the midwives. There is an agonizing hopefulness in participating in the mission of God in this world. As Paul reminds us, we are groaning while we wait.

Our daughter was born after 41 hours of a very complicated, difficult labor, attended by two midwives in our home. There were moments that I didn't think I was capable of what the occasion asked of me. I was sure I didn't have the strength. In fact, there were moments I thought it might kill me. But those midwives had the experiences of hundreds of births stitched into their uniform. They had been first-hand witnesses to the miracles of God brought about in fragile human vessels. So, when they told me "Keep pushing through the pain, you can do this," I believed them.

I've never been trained in obstetrics or practiced midwifery, but I've watched 8 seasons of *Call the Midwife*, so I'm practically a Midwife.<sup>18</sup> Well, not really. But I have spent the last two years researching the work of midwives and the metaphor of pastor as midwife to God's new creation. I believe we are in a season of the church in which we need to expand our metaphorical wardrobe. Suppose we believe, with Paul, that God is birthing something new and all creation is groaning and crying out in the pain of childbirth. Isn't it time we consider putting the shepherd outfit back on the hanger and suit up as midwives? Don't we need preachers who are attentive to the groaning and aching, who are listening and watching for signs of life and the dangers of labor? Don't we need hands in the pulpit that have the gentle strength of the one who, like the psalmist said, "took me from my mother's womb and placed me at my mother's breast."<sup>19</sup> Don't we need proclaimers and preachers who embody what Luce Irigaray calls, "The wisdom of love" and not merely lecturers who are obsessed with the love of wisdom?<sup>20</sup> And what better place to discover the wisdom of love than the bedside of enslaved and marginalized people crying out in pain patiently and courageously waiting for a miracle?

Jurgen Moltmann says, "When freedom is close the chains begin to hurt."<sup>21</sup> Birth is a violent and bloody ordeal. Christ endured pain and suffering and trusted in the faithful hands of God, the Divine Midwife, to deliver him through the empty tomb, and introduce the world to the bundle of joy: a new creation. But in the church, we have become so pain adverse, so comfortable and well fed, protected by our shepherds that we wince at pain, and dull our senses to ignore the freedom that is crowning at the margins of our ecclesial communities.

Our congregation has been through a considerable amount of pain in the last several years. The Covid pandemic took it a toll on our members who lost loved ones and saw their friends and family members walk away from the church community. Even before the pandemic, they had just hired their first female lead pastor - which proved more difficult than anyone expected - after saying goodbye to a long tenured lead pastor and worship pastor. Church trauma

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<sup>18</sup> I am assuming the reading catches my sarcasm here as well as my deep respect for those who have medical and professional training in women's health.

<sup>19</sup> Psalm 22:9

<sup>20</sup> Irigaray, Luce, *The Way of Love*, (London: Continuum, 2002), 1-11.

<sup>21</sup> Moltmann, Jurgen, *Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992) 137.



compounded by loss and grief. And yet, throughout even the most difficult days, we had a sense that God was at work. It seemed possible that the darkness we were experiencing wasn't the shadow valley of death but the lightless cradle of the womb. Today we are experiencing new life that we never could have planned or strategized on our own. But there are still many days when I feel the aching and groaning of the congregation, some of it brought on by my own disruptive presence in the congregation and I know we are all wondering, *I don't know if we can do this. I don't know if we can survive this.*

On those days I imagine putting on the uniform of Shiphrah and Puah on the day the Israelites crossed the red sea, and the waves come crashing down on Pharaoh's army. I imagine Miriam and Moses and Aaron looking at each other and saying, "Who knew that we could do this? Who would have thought that this was possible? Who could have known that God could work like this..." But someone knew. Tucked in among the crowd, quietly basking in the bright light of freedom, the midwives knew. These women had spent a lifetime sitting at the bedside of slave women screaming and crying out in pain and they watched God work miracles. The midwives knew what God was capable of in fragile human vessels. So may we have the courage to suit up as midwives for the new creation event to which we have been invited.

*Feeding & Being Fed*  
Rev. Michaele LaVigne

*Rev. Michaele LaVigne is mom to her 6-year-old daughter and 8-year-old son, a wife of seventeen years, ordained elder, author, and spiritual director living in South Bend, Indiana.*

In the summer of 2018, I was given the gift of a sabbatical. I was in a season of intense mothering: within four years, I had given birth to two children and helped birth a church in between.

I. was. tired.

But it wasn't just sleep-deprived tired. I was also tired in my spirit – a tiredness familiar to many of us in ministry, I think. It's the kind of tired that comes from feeling that things are more wrong than we have time or capacity to fix and that the brokenness of people we love is too heavy a burden to carry.

In this state of exhaustion, I received very clear words from Jesus, by way of his conversation with Peter in John 21. This conversation is the beautiful story of a miraculous catch of fish, breakfast on the beach, and then Jesus's conversation with Peter afterward. And when Jesus invites Peter to feed sheep, it's an invitation, a request, and a statement of trust. Jesus's dearly loved flock was entrusted to Peter.

We rightly recognize this as an honor, but I think sometimes we forget that shepherding is not a glamorous job. And it may just be that I've been pastoring and "momming" simultaneously for the last 8-plus years, but to me, shepherding is incredibly like mothering.

First of all, there is So. Much. Feeding. Why do people have to eat so much?! And it's not just the baby stage. Humans still pretty much have to eat multiple times a day – forever. Shopping,

meal planning, washing and chopping, cooking – or even ordering the right amount of food from a restaurant that everyone can agree on– it’s all work. And it doesn’t stop.

But like shepherding, mothering isn’t just about food, either. There’s also the clean-up, the corralling, the tending to varying levels of injuries and illnesses. There’s the scary moments of running down the one who wandered away and the joy of watching them play. Then there’s the momentous day when you realize the little ones under your care know you and recognize your voice.

Whether as a mother, shepherd, pastor, or all three – there is something truly wondrous about the care, nurture, and guidance of others’ lives. But there is no sidestepping the fact that it is hard, and it sure can be exhausting.

So when I was directed to spend time in John 21 while on my sabbatical retreat, I brought many of my own recent experiences to this idea of “feeding sheep.” I knew Jesus’s words to Peter were words to me as well. But instead of a sense of honor and excitement, I felt resentment bubbling up from some deep place within me.

On one hand this felt like not enough because a meal hardly solves all the world’s problems. Feeding sheep wasn’t going to answer all the impossible questions, or instantaneously lift the weight of so much brokenness. It seemed feeding sheep would do nothing to change all the things that were really the most wrong in the world, or in my own spirit.

And yet at the very same time, it felt like way too much to ask me to feed sheep. I really did love the people under my care – both my children and my congregation. But it’s just that you have to *keep feeding* them. It’s not a once-and-done deal! Within a congregation, it’s the constants of walking with people, guiding them with love and gentleness, allowing them to wander instead of rushing them to my own agenda, feeding them week after week of Sunday services that they may or may not show up for.

And while I don’t like to admit it, there was something within me that wanted my job to be different. Bigger somehow, or more substantial; something that I knew was going to get done and stay done. The overlapping work of shepherding, pastoring, and mothering is so full of mundane, repetitive tasks that are so essential to sustaining life and yet are so hidden they hardly seem to matter. I wanted a break, but it felt like I was being asked to do more. I could feel my exhaustion spanning out forever, and it made me want to weep.

But then, right when my frustration and despondency was reaching fever pitch – I saw it. Or heard it, or felt it, I’m not quite sure. One of those realizations struck deep within me: Before Peter was asked to feed sheep – Jesus. Fed. Peter.

The breakfast on the beach. The roasted fish over the fire. How had I missed this?! Peter was literally fed by his good shepherd! Jesus is Savior, King, Emmanuel, Prince of Peace – and *Breakfast Maker*? What a beautiful, astounding thing that the creator of the universe planned ahead, brought supplies, made a fire, and cooked breakfast for his exhausted friends. Jesus saw them, understood their need, and found a most beautiful and practical way to care for them. Here was Jesus, taking on the repetitive, mundane tasks so essential to sustaining life – the work of a shepherd, and the work of a mother.

And in that moment, it was like Jesus was saying the same words to me I said often to my cranky, hangry toddler: “Michaele, you need to eat. Let me feed you.” Could it be that Jesus wanted to make me breakfast, too? Could it be that Jesus saw my own exhaustion, understood me, and offered me the care that I needed? As a woman weary from the work of mothering, this felt like an invitation to let Jesus provide *me* the care of a Perfect Mother.

It was and continues to be a magnificent gift to recognize Jesus himself doing the same kind of work I do every day. If Jesus makes food for tired, hungry people, maybe it’s not such a lowly job after all. If Jesus has patient, repetitive conversations with those who are slow to get it, maybe it’s not such a waste of time after all. If Jesus gives himself over to the smallness of nurturing others, maybe that small work actually *is* the big work!

But perhaps most honoring, convicting and sustaining of all has been the recognition that Jesus wants to teach me about shepherding and mothering – by *shepherding and mothering me himself!* Since that momentous time of prayer during my sabbatical in 2018, I have been grounded in this truth: In spite of my best intentions, if I’m not placing myself first under the care of my Perfect Mother and Good Shepherd, I will never be the mother and shepherd – for my children or my congregation – God desires me to be. My ability to receive love and care from Jesus is directly correlated with my ability to offer love and care to others.

This is true for the church’s fathers and mothers, of course. Only when we have spent time being fed can we understand what it means to feed sheep. But there seems to be something in mothers that tends to forget our own need to be mothered. You know that thing flight attendants always tell you when you’re flying with a small child? “Remember ma’am, put your oxygen mask on first.” So I imagine Jesus looking at us with eyes even more knowing, more urgent, and more loving. “Remember, daughter, let me feed you first.”

*Reflections on the Messy, Beautiful Patterns God Creates*

Rev. Dr. Mindi Cromwell

*With her boys now in college and high school, Mindi Cromwell is now ordained in the Free Methodist Church and the Chair of the Ministry and Theology Department at Central Christian College with a Ph.D. in Historical Theology.*

In my family of origin, embroidering tea towels was a love language. The women of my family would painstakingly stick iron-on patterns onto white muslin towels. Crafting and handiwork were a part of our shared tradition.

In Ephesians 2:10, we read that “...we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” The handiwork of the women in my family was direction and pattern based. We were artists who functioned within boundaries. We liked to know what was next, what supplies to buy, and which colors to use.

But our lives as God’s handiwork don’t have such explicit instructions. There’s not always a set of directions that tell us which step is next. So allowing myself to cede control of my life to God, particularly in making adjustments to My Plan, is a journey I’m still on. And many of the deepest lessons I learned when turning control over to God came during my children’s infant and toddler years as I balanced motherhood, ministry, and the classroom.

While attending a holiness college in the mid-1990s, a mentor invited me to be a part of a women in ministry group as I discerned a call to ministry. After college, I went into graduate school in theology as I continued to understand my call to serve God in the classroom and beyond. These years presented many changes and challenges. I was often the only woman or one of two women in my classes. The overall atmosphere was stifling rather than invigorating. Other changes happened during these years as well. I got married, began formal ministerial candidacy, and had children. The path I set out on, earning a Ph.D. and moving full-time into classroom ministry, would not become a part of my story for 20 more years.

*I am God's handiwork and He is weaving together my story.*

In the midst of tumultuous times in my life I have often lost sight of the way God was weaving together the various parts to make something more beautiful than I could have originally imagined.

During the dark, difficult, and diligent days of writing my dissertation, my advisor left my program. Though he remained on my doctoral committee I had a new in-person overseeing my work. I had exceeded the time allotted to complete the dissertation and had been given an extension or two. I was at the point where the program said I'd be discontinued if I didn't finish by the end of that year. My experience within the program had me questioning whether I really enjoyed academia and was ready to walk away from that world completely. And that was when an older scholar in a different field met me and committed to pray me until I finished my dissertation.

At that same time another mentor from my past knew that my academic future was uncertain. She said to me, "Mindi, God doesn't always intend for us to walk to the end of a path he starts us on. Sometimes, he wants us to walk down it a ways to get to another path." Those words, spoken at just the right time, helped me to readjust my expectations of how God was calling me in this next season. At the end of that path I did end up completing my Ph.D. In later years I returned to this truthful counsel repeatedly when faced with future detours and closed paths. The story God weaves together is full of so many surprises.

One small surprise was that my call to the classroom didn't end. I didn't feel comfortable pursuing roles that put me into the politics of either academic departments or institutional turmoil. Instead, I wanted to pursue a situation that allowed me to focus on teaching. The expectation of academic Ph.D. programs that gave full tuition scholarships plus stipends was that their graduates would go on and contribute to the scholarly conversation. That was the kind of program I earned my degree through. But as I crawled across the finish line as a new mother and freshly minted Ph.D., I wasn't sure those goals aligned with my calling and my own emotional readiness. I graduated with a toddler in tow and we soon added a second child to our family. During this time, I needed to figure out who God was calling me to be despite both outside expectations and what I had thought was the next step in my path.

*I am to be attentive to the good works I am called to in this season.*

One of the lessons that I had difficulty learning is that each season of life would bring its own "good works" that I was being called into. More often than not I felt that I was being handed a craft kit with no directions.

What did it look like to do a particular season ‘s “good works”? Towards the middle of my program, I had given birth to our first child. Raising a baby, trying to write my dissertation, and continuing on the ordination process became a juggling act that defined my life in this period. It was not the joyful time I expected early motherhood to be. Rather, I struggled with how the stress of my academic calling was overshadowing motherhood and family life. Sometimes the “good works” looked like the bare minimum of survival.

Over the next few years as our family grew, I had to distinguish the calling of Christ on my life as opposed to the life others around me were expecting of me. Through several of my children’s baby/toddler years my husband was in full time ministry while I primarily cared our two kids at home and served in adjunct roles at various colleges. There was an expectation from my professional mentors and myself that I would move quickly into full time academic work. When I stood back and assessed the situation I realized that I still enjoyed focusing on classroom teaching without institutional drama. Not taking a full-time job and continuing to adjunct allowed me to be with my kids in a way that felt comfortable for our family.

As time passed, situations changed. I now find myself chair of a Ministry and Theology Department at a sister college of my alma mater. I am in full-time academic ministry. And as I look back over God’s guidance through the past 27 years, I see the message of 1 Corinthians 14:58 threaded throughout my life: “My dear brothers and sisters, stay firmly planted—be unshakable—do many good works in the name of God, and know that all your labor is not for nothing when it is for God.” The path I thought I was on as a college student moving into the academic track of advanced graduate school included detours I had never planned. But the path I’ve walked with God has shaped me to be the whole person He had called me to be as a professor and pastor and mother.

*Finding My Calling as a Mother and Clergy Wife*  
Rev. Dr. Vicki Copp

*Vicki Copp is currently pastoring in Cameron, MO, chairing the KC District Board of Ministry and serving as a trustee at NTS. Vicki’s daughters are in their mid-thirties with two children each. The family is all adjusting to the loss of Vicki’s husband, and their father, Dan.*

I became aware of God’s specific call on my life in my mid-thirties when our daughters were toddlers. My husband, Dan, was in his second assignment, pastoring a large church on the Southern California District. When I shared my experience of calling one Sunday morning, we decided it would be best to take a posture of waiting and listening. We made my call public about two years later at a district assembly and were encouraged at the enthusiastic response of our parishioners and district leaders.

I struggled with my call at first, mostly because I wasn’t sure what I was supposed to do or what it would look like. I often went to Dan for reassurance, but he finally told me that I had to be convinced myself and not depend on his encouragement. I’m not sure I would have believed it if someone had been able to describe what my calling would eventually become.

Over the past thirty years, my call has been expressed in worship leading and teaching (Bible studies, English as a new language, classes in the course of study, courses at Nazarene Bible

College and Nazarene Theological Seminary). It has looked like directing a school of ministry, and the supervised ministry program at NTS. It has meant being an associate pastor, a consultant, and serving on district boards, denominational boards, and as trustee at MNU and NTS. It has meant preaching to the homeless, and at Women's Retreats, Camp meetings, Revivals, and in University Chapel services. Now, the most rewarding of all, my call is serving as lead pastor at Cameron, MO Church of the Nazarene.

Shortly after I was called, I began work on a Master of Theology at Point Loma Nazarene University. I had been leading a women's Bible study that commonly included Greek and Hebrew word studies. Desiring to learn more, I decided to start my studies with a class in Greek. The class was scheduled at 7:30 in the morning, and the campus was twenty minutes away. Dan volunteered to get our girls (6 and 8 at the time) up, dressed and off to school while I attended class three days a week. He looked back fondly on those early mornings with his girls.

While taking Greek, I taught our girls the Greek alphabet using the "Short'ning Bread" tune from the back of my textbook. When Mackenzie was in fourth grade, her classroom studied the country of Greece. She raised her hand and volunteered that she knew the Greek alphabet. Her teacher seemed skeptical, so Mackenzie flawlessly serenaded the class. Consequently, she was invited back to that classroom every year to sing during their unit on Greece! Both of my daughters can still sing the Greek alphabet! Maybe I'll teach my grandchildren...

Our daughters were ten and eleven by the time I finished the course of study, graduated with my Master's, and was ordained on the Southern California District. I have a picture someone took of them sitting and watching me with other family members at my ordination. I'm sure they had no concept of what was happening, but I enjoy looking at that picture and imagining what was going on in their little heads.

We remained at the church where I was called for thirteen years. It was a struggle adjusting from Pastor's Wife to the additional role of Associate Pastor. Those folks are to be commended for allowing that to happen. It wasn't easy. Dan tried to be very careful in how I was perceived in the congregation. He desired to be supportive but was also fearful about backlash if I took too prominent a role. I used to fault him for that until I recently read his journals from that era. There were many congregational challenges during the time I was responding to my call.

When I ask my grown daughters what they remember about that time, they have little memory of my ministry role. Dan had a larger-than-life place in their lives, whereas mine was mostly experienced from the standpoint of what I did as their mother.

When Dan became the Arizona District Superintendent, our girls were 12 and 13. Dan had communicated our unique (at that time) situation of still having children in the home and a wife who was an ordained elder. Afterwards a leading pastor reminded me that caring for my children was my first priority. This was not the first time I had heard that reminder from someone concerned that following my call was somehow heading in the wrong direction. Each time I have recalled that God was aware I had children when calling me.

These days, I pastor without my husband since his passing in 2021. Anyone who has known loss with children knows that we must deal with our own grief and also be present to theirs. Mackenzie and her husband, moved in with us during Dan's final days. They have stayed on, and as my granddaughters remind me, I am part of their family now. They are God's grace to me.

I had planned on Dan joining me in ministry when he retired, but he had only served a few weeks before he got ill. Because I am approaching retirement age, I wasn't sure I could remain alone in this assignment. I was grateful when God called my daughter, Mackenzie Wood, to come alongside me as my partner in ministry.

These days we have wonderful mentoring conversations about the church's worship and how best to disciple and care for its people. God has opened many doors for her in relationships with young moms in the congregation and community. Not long ago, she was presented a local minister's license. She hopes to be district licensed, finish the course of study, and be ordained following in her mother's footsteps.

My daughter, Megan, is a gifted vocalist who inspires worship in those who are listening. She has sung on the worship teams of the churches she has attended and those where her husband, Ryan Albaugh, has been assigned as pastor. She has many gifts, but they are primarily used these days in raising her daughter and special needs son.

Although I am headed toward 70, the journey is not over. I find great joy in the ministry of my daughters and their husbands. I continue to learn more about my calling and how to be a faithful pastor every day. It is very different being without Dan in ministry, but God is faithful and sustains me in ways that simply amaze me

*Unfathomable Journey*  
Rev. Deanna Hayden

*Deanna was an associate pastor for 6 years and a lead pastor for 9 years. She has two children, ages 12 and 14, and is currently serving as an adjunct professor while finishing her PhD in Wesleyan theology.*

"I'm not going to have kids," I casually told a friend while hiking a mountain in Korea. "God called me to full-time ministry, and I can't be a mom and a full-time minister." It's likely, if someone had shown me my future life 10 years from that moment, I would have had some kind of breakdown. What I imagined was the role of motherhood came from my own mom, who stayed home with us and in my unbiased opinion, was the best mom ever. Unfortunately, I did not see how I could be a good mom while also being a minister.

It was a difficult enough stretch to imagine myself as a pastor, but that is another topic and story. To add motherhood to that vocational calling was simply unfathomable; I believed I needed to choose between the two: motherhood or ministry. I chose what I thought was most faithful to God's guidance. But in later conversations with my future husband, we discovered a mutual desire to have children. So the journey of the unfathomable began.

Theoretical challenges were plentiful: I had doubts about my ability to be a mom and pastor, and my congregation doubted as well. For example, at my congregational interview for a senior pastor position, I was asked, "How will you be a wife, mother, homemaker, and full-time pastor?" While my answer was eloquent in the face of an inappropriate question, my mind echoed the same doubt. I knew God would give me strength for whatever challenges were ahead, but I felt inadequate.

If theoretical challenges were plentiful, logistical challenges were overwhelming. Working moms are not unusual. But minister-moms have a unique challenge: both roles require a self-

sacrificial posture. The minister is expected to give of herself for the sake of the congregation and community. The mother is supposed to give of herself for the sake of her children. These aren't unfounded expectations. They are Jesus' words to those who would be disciples: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."<sup>22</sup> Whether a person leads church or children, they must deny themselves to do it in Christlikeness.

This is a heavy expectation for the minister. Indeed, many studies have been conducted regarding the level of burnout ministers reach in their attempts to give of themselves for the sake of the gospel. We are on call 24/7, expected to fulfill an endless number of roles, from theologian to counselor to groundskeeper to administrator. There is never a shortage of opportunities for the minister to practice self-denying love.

The mother also carries a heavy burden. Many moms enter motherhood like baptism by fire, with sleep deprivation for weeks and months, even years. Then we begin the journey of juggling the tasks of discipline, childcare, school, and schedules, together with the often intangible yet agonizing tasks of prayer, discipling, listening, and counsel. It's no wonder I've heard it said that a pastor/parent's first congregation is their family. Intentional, Christlike mothering is its own full-time ministry. There is never a shortage of opportunities for the mother to practice self-denying love.

Yet, if a woman is to deny herself for her congregation and her children, at some point there will no longer be a self to deny. This is the crux.

What can we do? I propose two ideas. First, if a life of self-denial is lived out of the desire to follow Jesus, observing the whole of Christ's self-denial is essential. Samuel Chadwick captured this when he examined Christ's self-emptying in Philippians 2. He stated, "there is a *Pleroma* [or "fullness"] as well as a *Kenosis*. Our Lord emptied Himself, but the Father gave to His self-emptied Son the fullness of His Spirit."<sup>23</sup> We are not meant to practice self-denial or self-emptying without also being filled with God. The mutual self-giving of the Holy Spirit and the minister/mother work together in a constant flow of emptying and filling, to sustain us in love. This might sound wonderful, but what does it mean practically? How can we be filled as we are constantly emptied?

We must not underestimate the impact of prayer in letting God fill us. Specifically, we must pray with that as a goal. This happens as God speaks in our silence following prayers of lament and frustration. It happens as we pray the scriptures and journal. Some mornings as I pastored through overwhelming circumstances, I felt drained every day. I prayed with my kids, sent them to school, and then spent hours crying, listening to songs that spoke to my soul, and re-reading passages God gave me. God carried me in those moments and used them to strengthen me for the tasks at hand. God also fills us through encouraging words of others (a word to the wise: record those words for keeping). We must learn the ways God uniquely fills us and engage those activities regularly.

The second proposal regarding self-denial is to understand the self we are called to deny. Self-denial is usually understood physically through fasting or spiritually by resisting pride. This

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<sup>22</sup> Matthew 16:24, NRSV. See also Mark 8:34 and Luke 9:23.

<sup>23</sup> Samuel Chadwick, *The Way to Pentecost* (Berne, IN: Light and Hope Publications, 1937), 59.



tended to be how Wesley wrote about self-denial. In many instances, it is a helpful understanding of the discipline. However, what does this say to the mother/minister who doesn't struggle much with pride and selfishness? Instead, she struggles with putting church and children above God? It says, "Keep denying yourself; it is the only way you will be faithful to God." This is not necessary or sustainable! The problem then is not selfishness, but a misplaced sense of self. Diane Leclerc's work *Singleness of Heart* provides good guidance here. Instead of thinking of sin primarily as pride, Leclerc offers the concept of sin as idolatry. Thinking of sin as idolatry would set forth pride as self-idolatry. However, this new definition leaves room for understanding sin as what Leclerc calls "relational idolatry," in which a woman elevates devotion to a relationship (husband, children, congregants) as primary, before God or a healthy sense of self.<sup>24</sup> In this instance, self-denial is denial of that misplaced sense of self and re-centering the self in Christ. This might happen by getting childcare so we can rejuvenate or when we confront someone who is mistreating us. When our nature would lead us to accept harmful behavior, or to find our identity in being a good mom, countering that nature is self-denial. This frees us from unrealistic expectations and allows us to find joy in our journey with God as a minister and a mom!

The unfathomable journey has not been easy. But because of God's grace, I have thrived! I've learned to better love and serve my kids and my church. I've walked with them to faith in Christ, baptized them, and watched them grow in love. I have become a healthier self. I had no idea that my unfathomable journey would lead me to the unfathomable riches of Christ!<sup>25</sup>

*A Season for Everything*  
Rev. Sunie Stolhand

*Sunie lives in Oklahoma with her husband, Rick, of 25 years and her two children. Jamie, age 20, works at the local Fire Department and Kendra is a High School Senior. Sunie is an ordained Elder in the CotN, recently serving at First Church of the Nazarene in Ponca City, OK as Senior Pastor. She also serves on the USA/CANADA Women Clergy Council. She is currently taking an extended Sabbatical from full-time ministry, to focus on her family, writing, Sabbath, and finding joy.*

The thing about mothers; once you become a mother, you cannot turn back. The very act of Mothering continues to evolve; it changes, flows, grows, and endures. To become a mother, one only has to give birth. It seems a simple enough task. In the United States, that we are a bit removed from the blood, sweat, and tears, the ripping and pain, the labor and rest, the heartache and delight-- but that is only the beginning.

In 2013, I was first given the privilege of serving as Senior Pastor at First Church of the Nazarene in Ponca City, Oklahoma. My children were 5 and 8 when I finally answered my own calling, partly because I wanted them to have the same foundation and knowledge that I was gifted with as a child. Being a mother pulled me into ministry and mothering well has helped me stay. In the beginning, my children were excited for this new adventure, but it did not remain that

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<sup>24</sup> Diane Leclerc, *Singleness of Heart: Gender, Sin, and Holiness in Historical Perspective*, Pietist and Wesleyan Studies 13 (Lanham, Maryland and London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc, 2001), xii.

<sup>25</sup> Ephesians 3:8

way. It was the words of another Pastor, ringing in my ears, that helped me endure through the years ahead.

In 2014, Rev Jess Middendorf presented a workshop, “The Prodigal Son”, at SNU PALCON. There were less than 20 of us in attendance. I did not know Rev Middendorf. I chose the workshop at random. If I remember right, it was a lunch workshop and I ate, at a tiny little desk, while Rev and Mrs. Middendorf talked about their youngest son and part of his faith journey. I say ‘part’ because, at the time, there was no happy ending. The workshop did not end in a feel-good antidote and cheers. After a raw and honest hour, it ended with something close to this: You can remain faithful to your calling while your loved one’s wrestle with theirs.

I thanked Rev and Mrs. Middendorf for their honest and genuine love for the church and their children. I thanked them for taking the time to share with us. Then, I went on with my life. It was a good workshop, but not relevant to my life. Little did I know how this would speak into the days ahead

What started out as excitement, for my children, soon began to turn into exhaustion, long nights, unhappy people, and lots of work. My children lived and breathed the church. Everything in our lives was connected with the church—our friends, family, ministries, community work, studies, our discussions. It seemed holy. We were birthing something new. Something beautiful. It was bound to be hard work. Labor.

And as more people were added to our numbers, I mothered them too. Old, young, male, female—I mothered them. To be a Mother is to birth but mothering is the very act of loving. I gave all I had to my growing group of ‘children.’ It wasn’t enough to teach the truth, I must live it. It wasn’t enough to preach about serving, I must serve. It wasn’t enough to show what love could look like, I had to be love itself. And that sounds delightful and beautiful and holy. And it is, but it is also hard and heavy and life changing.

See, as my children matured so did their growing pains. Not only within my parish but my own children—those who came from my body. The faith of a 6-year-old is not the faith of a 16-year-old. My 16-year-old needed to wrestle with his faith. He needed to question everything and fight against the things he didn’t understand. He didn’t want easy answers and he didn’t want false love. And unfortunately, that is what the church could give him, at the time. That is what I often gave him—and he roared and I wept. The more I preached the more he rebelled.

How could my own son be so angry at the same God I laid down my life for? How could he rally against God when I was praising God? It was unthinkable and confusing and threatening to my own understanding of faith. The longer I served the more complicated it became. My son’s faith, my family’s faith, my friends’ faith, our church’s faith--it did not always come easy. It was/is messy, hard, and even bloody. I wanted to quit. I wanted them to quit. Mostly, I think I just deeply desired for everyone to behave.

They didn’t.

They wouldn’t.

They won’t.

I wept. I considered walking away completely.

Until one day, I remembered the words of Rev Middendorf as he told of his son: struggling, rebelling, defying. I remembered his words, planted deep within my heart, waiting for the day I needed them to bloom. You can remain faithful to your calling while your loved ones wrestle with theirs.

Jesus said, there is no greater love than laying down your life for a friend. John actually quotes Jesus as saying. “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” (John 16:12-13).

This is mothering: we lay down our lives for others. Every minute of every day, we are living to serve others—whether it is our own children or the spiritual children entrusted to us. We give our days, nights, minutes, hours—our life, to them. We pray with them, feed them, wash them, clothe them, guide them, weep with them, rebuke them, hold them, and sit with them.

We are faithful mothers; we are the ones who hold our squalling newborns up to the world and declare them beautiful.

We are faithful mothers; we are the ones who nurture all things struggling while they fight to survive.

We are faithful mothers; we cry out for our children who are hurting.

We are faithful mothers; we rally against injustice in the margins.

We are faithful mothers; we wash the feet of the world, often with our own hair.

We are faithful mothers; we are the ones who sit in the blood and pain with those we love.

We are faithful mothers; we lay down our lives for the Church and it begins with our own families.

It is a calling that God is still teaching me and walking me through.

My children are now 17 and 20. I do not have a feel-good anecdote or ending to this story. They are still wrestling with their faith, my son especially. They have seen things and lived things and they are curious and complex. They have questions and complaints. Some days faith comes easy and some days it comes hard. They are growing. This is what seasons look like and I love them through it all.

Mothering my own children has given me the gift of deep love that overflows into the Church and it has made me a better pastor. Pastoring a church has given me the gift of remembering God’s faithfulness through all seasons. Pastoring has made me a better mother. To give birth is a beautiful and holy journey, but as a minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ my goal is more than to simply birth new things—it is to faithfully Mother. This extends from my own children onto everyone in my Parish (under my care).

Mother. Pastor.

The two cannot be separated.

For these things I am grateful.

And for the mothers in the church, how ever large your brood, please allow me to remind you of the words of Ecclesiastes 3, as you walk through different seasons with your people:

There is a time for everything,  
 and a season for every activity under the heavens:

- <sup>2</sup> a time to be born and a time to die,  
 a time to plant and a time to uproot,
- <sup>3</sup> a time to kill and a time to heal,  
 a time to tear down and a time to build,
- <sup>4</sup> a time to weep and a time to laugh,  
 a time to mourn and a time to dance,
- <sup>5</sup> a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them,  
 a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing,
- <sup>6</sup> a time to search and a time to give up,  
 a time to keep and a time to throw away,
- <sup>7</sup> a time to tear and a time to mend,  
 a time to be silent and a time to speak,
- <sup>8</sup> a time to love and a time to hate,  
 a time for war and a time for peace.

I leave you with this:

“I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it” (Ecc. 3:14)

When the days seem bleak or hard, remember all creation moves through life in seasons. We are called to these seasons together, even when they are hard—birth and death, light and darkness, Winter and Spring. It is not our calling to change the seasons or redirect them, we could not manage if we tried.

God can be trusted with our family and those we love. Everything God does will endure forever. We simply have to hang on to each other through the seasons. There is no greater love than to stay with someone while they are struggling through their own faith, while they journey through whatever season they are in. That is our calling as mothers. The call of a mother is to endure, lay down their own lives, live with others and be beside them—this is love.

And it is hard and messy and beautiful—but labor often is.

*Callings In Conflict? Navigating Pastoral Ministry  
 Throughout Pregnancy, Maternity Leave, & Newborn Life*  
 Reverend Jeni Hall, MDiv

*Currently, Jeni Hall serves as lead pastor of a congregation on the Oregon Coast. Jeni is married to her associate pastor and together they have a beautiful baby girl who is three months old. While pregnant, Jeni wrapped up her final semester at Nazarene Theological Seminary where she graduated with a Master of Divinity.*

Before I felt the call to motherhood, I felt the call to pastoral ministry. In the depths of my soul, I always knew motherhood would be a part of my story, but it felt very far off. What constantly compelled me was my calling to disciple God’s people. Serving as a senior pastor is truly what I have lived for ever since I realized there was a place where women could lead God’s Church. In

my mid 20s, I pastored a small church as a single woman. Then I met an amazing man who would soon become my husband and partner in ministry since he also had a call to full-time ministry. So even though I was nearing my 30s, motherhood was still a distant thought.

When God finally awakened that part of my heart, all the fears hit. “Can I ‘mom’ well *and* pastor well?” The only example I had of how parenthood and the pastorate collide was male pastors who were married to stay-at-home moms. Dad worked tirelessly as a pastor while mom toted around all the kids. A well-meaning pastor once told me that I needed to be prepared to step away from ministry to “raise my children.” All this combined makes me wonder if it was possible for these two callings, pastoral leadership & motherhood, to work together? These questions haunted me all throughout my pregnancy, even to the point that sometimes I regretted getting pregnant. I felt like I was turning my back on my calling to be a pastor.

Somewhere along the way, a holy fire began to burn in my heart to figure out a way to excel in both arenas. I knew that if God had called me to be a mom and a pastor, there must be a way forward that did not mean leaving my role as senior pastor or being a sub-par, absent mom. I began to wonder, “could the Church show the world a better way to value families in the workplace?” There is something very holy about children being present in life. Jesus himself was “indignant”<sup>26</sup> when the disciples attempted to keep children away from him. In response to this act, Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.”<sup>27</sup> Scripture goes on to tell us that Jesus embraced the children and blessed them.

There are compelling spiritual implications here. Introducing children to Jesus is vital. Doing “church-life” so that children have a natural place in the church’s life is vital. I suggest that this text also gives us reason to believe that children have a vital role in our world. Jesus bestowed upon children the dignity of being seen, noticed, and given a place to thrive. As a pastor, I must ask myself where can children be opening present if they are not welcome to intervene in the pastoral role? If Jesus wanted children to be with him, why do so many pastors feel the need to remove children from the “workplace” of the Church?

In a study by Barna Research in 2013, it was found that one-third of pastors with children age 15 or older said their child is no longer actively involved in church.<sup>28</sup> Pastors were asked to report why they think this is the case. Three of the reasons reported were “exposure to the negative aspects of church” (18%), “pastor is too busy for them” (17%), and “failure to make their faith their own” (7%). Without judgement, I wonder how many of these pastors’ kids were also exposed to the day-to-day beauty of ministry? Would exposure throughout childhood to the joys of the communal life of God’s people make up for the times in which ministry is inevitably painful?

As my daughter grows, I picture taking her on house calls, holding her hand as I serve communion to our church family, sharing meals around the dinner table with church members, making space for her ask questions as I prepare a sermon, asking her permission before I use her as sermon content, etc. As a senior pastor, foster a church environment where the sound of

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<sup>26</sup> Mark 10:14 NRSV

<sup>27</sup> Mark 10:14-15 NRSV

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.barna.com/research/prodigal-pastor-kids-fact-or-fiction/>

children is celebrated and not considered a distraction. I must champion and encourage parents to bring their children along to things even when leaving them home or not coming at all would be easier. Based on what I read of Jesus in scripture, I think he would have functioned in this way as a parent. After all, his father – our good God – gets messy with us each and every day.

So currently, my 12-week-old daughter goes everywhere with me. Pastoral life gets interrupted by her cries, hunger, need for a diaper change, and ever changing nap schedule. It is messy, but it feels like a holy calling to allow these two important callings from God to collide. Perhaps as I do life in such a way that my child does not suffer because of my calling or career, others will be encouraged to believe that they can also raise healthy children *and* live out their life calling.

### *Encountering Jesus in the Chaos*

Rev. Robbie Cansler

*Robbie is a church planter and pastor in Hammond, Indiana, serving there with her family for eight years. Her boys are 4, 2, and 6 months.*

Every Sunday morning you can hear me shouting “everyone needs to be holding a hand before crossing the street,” as we walk from the parsonage to our church building. Our youngest son is strapped to my chest in his carrier while his older brothers, aged 4 and 2, rush to grab onto my hands. There is chaos in these moments. I go through the mental checklist of things we need, the diaper bag, the church keys, a copy of my sermon, and the numerous other items that go back and forth from our home to the church.

When I open the front door, there is a flurry of movement as the older boys race to see who can turn the sanctuary lights on the fastest. My mental list expands to emptying dehumidifiers, checking the toilet paper in the restrooms, making sure the communion elements are ready to go, and printing off the bulletins for the morning service. I step over toys walking into my office, which has been mistaken by plumbers and hvac repair people as a church daycare center.

There is nothing calm and quiet about our Sunday mornings. They are rarely reflective and easy. Coffee is not lingered over but is drank hastily as we are rushing to the task at hand. This is a snapshot of motherhood and ministry.

It would be easy to only see the chaos. The constant juggling, and often failing to juggle, all the things that need to happen to run a church and a family. But to take this Sunday morning snapshot and overlay it to the entirety of this life would be a mistake.

Because amidst this chaos, these small boys I get to call my own, are being formed in the faith. Even when they are running amuck around the sanctuary, they stop for communion each week, when little else will stop them. I can hear their little voices reciting the Lord’s Prayer, and I watch them rush to the front to finish off the grape juice from the chalice. They are being formed each and every week, by the church’s practices.

Just as important as their formation is the way that I am being formed by their presence. I’ve reflected a lot the last few years about what Jesus meant in Matthew 19 when he said, “Let the children come to me”. I don’t think the parents bringing their children to Jesus were just quietly waiting in the background. I truly think this was a disruption. Children are loud, messy, and rarely do they sneak quietly into a space.

The disciples very likely had good intentions when they tried to keep the children away, because they were focused on all of the really important things that Jesus had to do with his time: he needed to heal people, he needed to take the legalists down a peg or two, he needed to feed people and to preach good news to the poor. Children felt like a distraction to all the good things that needed to be done, but Jesus tells the disciples not to hinder them from coming, because the kingdom of God belongs to them.

This snapshot of Jesus is where I live now. My children are not quiet, they don't sit still for very long, they are messy, they are impatient, but they rush to the table for communion. While some of it is because they really like grape juice, I truly believe that a large part of it is because they want to be close to Jesus. If I get caught up in the chaos, if I overlay that to the entirety of my ministry, and view them as a burden to be managed, then I am keeping them from running to Jesus.

But I am also keeping myself from learning really deep and important things about this life of faith too.

I am terrible at rest, because I feel obligated to juggle all of the tasks at hand (at the same time), and, as I said, I find myself rushing to the next thing frequently, but my children completely disregard my to-do list. They will at times look at me and ask for pajama day, or to sit outside and eat lunch just because it is a nice day. They take time to look for roly-poly bugs in the grass, and marvel at the smallest sparkly rock. They will find the most interesting leaf in a pile of hundreds. My insistence on rushing to the next important task often keeps me from the wonder of the moment. It often keeps me from the gift and worship that is rest.

It seems counterintuitive that as my life got busier when I had children, that I learned to rest more, and to simplify more. Nothing reflects back on you quite like children. So even though many areas of my life have sped up, I have really been forced to slow down. To strip away the things that don't matter so much, and to focus on the things that do.

Maybe the best illustration of this was during advent last year. I was a bundle of stress because we didn't have our usual decoration day at church. We didn't have a team putting up Christmas trees, and I felt obligated to do all the work myself. I was worried that people would judge me for not having our church "ready for Christmas." So, I played the comparison game as I saw pastors posting how beautiful their sanctuaries looked, while ours looked like it always does, a little bit messy, and very simple.

I am not proud of how resentful I felt that no one offered to help with the image I had in my head of the perfect Christmas sanctuary. Then, as I was walking out amidst the chaos of a Sunday morning, with my kids in tow, talking about how I needed to get to the church to put up the Christmas decorations, my husband stopped me and said "You know Jesus will be born whether or not there are Christmas trees in the church this year."

It seems silly, but it stopped me in my tracks, and I looked at my tiny kids and thought "he's right." God does not need a perfectly decorated space to be honored. I knew at that moment that what I wanted them to learn was that Christ comes into the midst of our mess and chaos, and that God loves us where we are, Christmas trees or no Christmas trees. I didn't want to rob them of the wonder they have over simple things, by making it seem like everything that is good, must be grand. And so my boys and I put up 1 sad tree, a couple nativity sets, a handmade manger, and

put out the advent candles. We talked about Jesus coming, and the light and hope he would bring. In spite of myself, they thought it was the most beautiful and wonderful thing ever.

This chaotic life is teaching me to strip away the things that have become unintentionally important in the life of our church. It's teaching me to slow down, to strip away the sparkly and shiny, and find the simple joy of being in the presence of God with the people of God each and every week. It's reminding me that God is still present here in the midst of it all, if I just take the time to be present.

Now, every Sunday, we walk from the parsonage to our church on the corner; you will find my kids picking up leaves, balancing on the retaining wall, and rushing to be the first to turn the lights on in the sanctuary. Though less chaotic, I still have not discovered the secret to easy Sunday mornings. Yet, you will find me learning, week by week, not to get distracted by the things of lesser importance. Our family seeks to encounter Jesus as the most important thing, even in the chaos.