

Am I loved? Do I belong?

For those who participated in the Moderator's event yesterday these were the archetypal questions our culture seems to be asking. Whether people show up at Yyoga, or monasteries, whether they walk the Sun Run or hike one of the Lynn Valley trails, whether they coffee at Waves Tuesday mornings or in the parking lot of a daycare centre, whether in street gangs or religious communities, people in our culture look for public spaces that will hold their wondering, their worrying and the over-riding anxiety of our time:

Am I loved? Do I belong?

When we were pregnant with our first baby, and I was feeling terribly worried and ashamed that I couldn't possibly measure up to be good enough for this little life that was being entrusted to me, a very dear minister friend told me a story about a little boy who was being teased by the one he thought was his best friend. Returning from soccer practice, crying his eyes out, he ran into the house just as his dad was rounding a corner.

Drying his eyes, Dad picked up the little 8 year old and carried him to his bedroom where he could change and have a talk. After the story was told the little boy simply said "I want to ask him to stop." Meanwhile Mom and the baby had returned and began to participate in the conversation.

"Would you like us to help you ask him to stop?" Dad was a little worried he might say yes. Conflict was not his strong suit. "Yes"

Mom and Dad looked at each other with that knowing look "didn't I do the hard work last time; it's your turn to go. This feels like mothers work doesn't it? He told you the story, you go" Amazing what spouses can say to each other without uttering a word. Well the little boy put his hand in his dad's and said "can we go right now?" Decision made. Alright them.

On the way over the little boy and his father decide how it will go; they'll ask the best friend and a parent for a meeting and the little victim would simply say "I don't like it when you tease me in front of the other kids, you're my friend, would you please stop." Dad would say very little; it's good for people to learn self-advocacy. So they they knock on the best friend's house.

Mom answers. It's Saturday, the football game could be heard in the family room downstairs. Seems like everyone's home; good, this should go well.

Dad says to the other mom: "Is your son home, we'd like to have a talk with him, and we'd like you or his dad to be with us as we do...or both." Visibly upset, because they were all friends, Mom went downstairs where the family was having lunch in front of the TV and coaxed the other boy and his father to join her in this troubling situation. Neither the other dad or the other boy would come upstairs and mom was faced with this confrontation alone. And there they sat, worried mom, inadequate father listening while the little 8 year old asked a version of the archetypal question:

"Am I loved? Do I belong?"

"Will you ask him to please just stop!"

When he told me that story, my minister friend said, "you'll be that dad. And sometimes you'll be that mom. Sometimes you just have to be a mom. And sometimes you have to be a dad. Sheila too. You'll be fine!"

Am I loved? Do I belong?

Let me take you back to the stories that John read this morning, to the time when the in-your face itinerant preacher was stirring up spiritual trouble wherever he went within his religious community. In the first story, Jesus has heard that Herod has murdered his cousin John the Baptist killed and while the Pharisees don't particularly like Jesus upsetting the spiritual apple cart, they don't want to see him experience the same fate. They tell him to get outta Dodge.

Jesus laughs it off. "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work'" Three days. Good story telling here: what might happen when work is accomplished in three days?

I've got work to do so I'll go, says this feisty little Jewish guy, 'Jerusalem is the city that stones its prophets, and kills the ones who are sent to it.'

Then he remembers the scriptures: "oh Jerusalem, how I long to gather your children as a mother hen broods her chicks, but you will have none of it." Herod the Fox...Jesus the hen. Not exactly the picture of an action hero, but the imagery is pretty clear - 'Herod, even in all your trickery, you're going to have to kill me to get to my chicks.'

Am I loved? Do I belong?  
Fierce protection!

But from the telling of the second story, we discover that the brooding hen image is not really integrated in this itinerant rabble-rousing preacher. In the encounter with the even more feisty Syrophoenician Jesus learns one of the most important lessons he will ever learn in answer to those questions:

Am I loved? Do I belong?

After a crazy day of healing and preaching, Jesus is trying to get away from the crowds. He sneaks into someone's house. But the woman whose daughter is sick – she has an unclean spirit – comes to Jesus and begs him to heal her daughter. In another version of the story, she throws herself at his feet. She is of foreign origin and an enemy of his people. Women don't speak to men publicly, especially women of Canaan. He dismisses her. "My food is for my people, it's not fair to take their food and throw it to the dogs." Make no mistake friends, Jesus has just called this woman a dog.

I can imagine this woman, enraged by those words, picks herself up off the floor, finds her footing, dusts the crumbs of shame from her pride and stands tall. She turns away to leave, but has a thought. She turns back and spits on his feet: "even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." She turns and walks away. As she reaches the door Jesus, ashamed, embarrassed, having learned a huge lesson about the inclusiveness of God's love calls out 'woman, having said that, go, your daughter will be fine.'

Am I loved? Do I belong?  
Sometimes a mother's love is fierce.

These archetypal images of MOTHER come to us and our images of God open. What is it to be loved by and belong to

**Strong mother God, working night and day,  
planning all the wonders of creation,  
setting each equation, genius at play.**

Am I loved? Do I belong?  
Indeed my children, let me gather you as a mother hen gathers her chicks. I will lay down my life for you.  
Indeed my children, I will spit in the face of all powers, if it means you will live.

Amen.