

Isaiah 66:10-14

“Motherly Love”

4th Sunday after Pentecost

July 7, 2019

Our Redeemer Lutheran Church

Vicar Otterman

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God, Our Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Amen.

[Introduction]

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ.

While I was reading commentaries on our Old Testament reading from Isaiah, I discovered that there is an ancient and widespread tradition within Christian art that died out about four to five hundred years ago. That tradition was the depiction of Mary breast-feeding the infant Jesus.

According to Margaret Miles, who wrote a book on the rise and fall of the theme of nursing in Christian art, the image of the mother Mary nursing Jesus was common and widespread throughout the history of the church until the 15th century. In fact, the oldest known depiction of Mary is a fresco painting from the 2nd century, which shows the baby Jesus nursing on her lap.

This tradition, known as Nursing Madonna, was for a long time the church’s primary biblical image of God’s nourishment and salvation for His people. It wasn’t until the invention of the printing press that this image began to fall out of use in the church.

The ability to mass produce images with a printing press shifted our cultural perception of breasts from being a source of motherly love to being the subject of clinical anatomy and eroticism. By the year 1750, Western Christianity had lost the image of breast-feeding as a representation of spiritual nourishment, and Christian artists stopped painting the Nursing Madonna. Instead, that particular image of salvation was replaced with Mary at the foot of the cross.

[Mother Zion]

Although I am always happy to emphasize Christ’s death on the cross as the defining moment of God’s plan for salvation, it is a pity that we have allowed our human sinfulness to degrade one of the most used images depicting God’s love for us.

Just as God reveals Himself to be our heavenly Father, He continually uses elements of family relationships to communicate His love and commitment to us. In the book of Isaiah God refers to the city of Jerusalem, also known as Zion, as a mother to His people.

From the beginning of Israel, God chose Abraham and Sarah to be the parents to His people, a people who would be a blessing to all nations and through whom all people would be brought to worship God. But they were old and were unable to bear children on their own. So God promised them a child, and at the age of ninety-one Sarah gave birth to Isaac, and she said, “Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.” (*Genesis 21:7*)

Just like Sarah, God planned for Zion to give birth spiritually to the people of the world by drawing them up to God. But the people of Israel were full of sin, and they weren’t able to be the blessing God intended them to be without His help. Earlier in Isaiah, the prophet wrote that Israel was like a woman who didn’t have the strength to give birth. (*Isaiah 26:17-18; 37:3*)

[*Christ’s Mother*]

But then God chose Mary to be the mother to Jesus. He chose her to be the one who would carry him in her womb. He chose her to be the first human being to offer up her life to him in love and service. She held him in her loving embrace, watched over and protected him, and nursed him with her own milk, so he would grow into the man who would be redeem all creation.

Mary had a very special role in God’s plan of salvation, which is why the angel Gabriel called her “O favored one.” (*Luke 1:28*) She was the Theotokos, the mother of God. She was Jesus’ mother in the fullest way any human woman can be a mother to her children. And through her, God provided His Son with a mother’s love.

[*Our Spiritual Mother*]

And when you and I were baptized, we were adopted into God’s family and became sons and daughters of God. Would He not also provide us with a mother to take care of us and provide for all of our spiritual needs as children of the new creation?

Mary was chosen to bear and raise Jesus, and the redeemed Zion from the book of Isaiah, also known as the church, was chosen to bear us into our new life and provide us the milk of spiritual nourishment in God's Word and the sacraments to sustain our life in Christ.

That's why the image of Mary nursing Jesus was so important for the church for 1500 years. It was a sign of God's love for humanity, which shows his grace for us. He gives us the gifts of life that we don't deserve. He pours out his blessings on us like an overflowing river. He sends his servants to feed us with the Gospel of Jesus, and he wants us to drink deeply.

[Inappropriate and Offensive]

And yet that image of Mary was eventually deemed too inappropriate and offensive for use in the church around the 16th century. Society altered its perception of breastfeeding, and the message of grace and love attached to it was lost over the next couple hundred years.

Today, the church is facing a similar problem. The world often looks at the church and says, "Christians are so out of touch with the world. Everything they believe is archaic. Their rules are old and judgmental. Why can't they just catch up with the rest of us, or just disappear entirely."

Like the Nursing Madonna, the world no longer recognizes the church as the image of God on earth. They don't see it as the place where God grants us the gift of forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life. The world is actively trying to say that the church itself is inappropriate and offensive.

[Rejoice with Jerusalem]

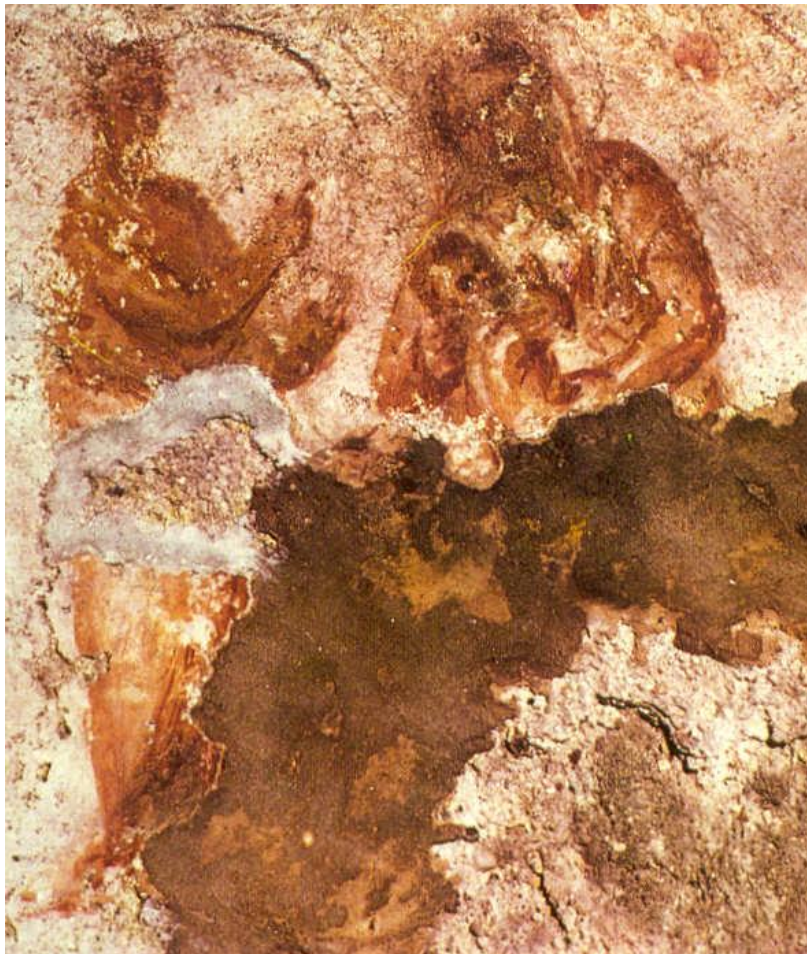
That is why Isaiah says at the end of today's passage, "You shall see, and your heart shall rejoice; your bones shall flourish like the grass; and the hand of the LORD shall be known to his servants, and he shall show his indignation against his enemies." (*Isaiah 66:14*)

The blessings we receive through the church give us life, comfort, and peace. Those who rejoice in those gifts and seek them out know God's love, but those who rebel and reject those gifts will know His anger.

The world turns its back on Jesus and the church, and it encourages us to do the same, but God urges us to rejoice in the church, just as an infant rejoices when cradled by its mother and fed milk by her breast. That image of dependency is lost to the world, but for those who are in Christ, it is a beautiful image of love and tenderness.

So as you go about your week, remember these words from Isaiah, “Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her, all you who love her; rejoice with her in joy, all you who mourn over her; that you may nurse and be satisfied.” (*Isaiah 66:10-11*)
Amen.

“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18)



Fresco of Mary, found in the Catacomb of Priscilla in Rome. Dated to the 2nd or 3rd century.