

I would like to wish all the mothers here today a happy Mother's Day. Before I talk about the scripture readings for today, let me give you a little background information.

I'm sure everyone knows that women were treated very differently in Jesus' day. The roles of men and women were highly defined. Judaism's roots were in a tribal society. Women were in a position of having little legal status and, mostly, had to depend upon men for just about everything whether the man was the woman's father, husband or brother. A woman without one of these relationships was in a very tough spot. This is why Jesus used "the widow and orphan" to refer to the most defenseless in society.

This does not mean that women were unimportant in Jewish society. Far from it, they were extremely important. Aside from caring for the home -- an extremely physical task as everything, even milling the grain to make flour, was done by hand -- they were the chief promoters of their family.

The family (which included the extended family) was the most important unit in society. Status in society came from your family. A person's identity was so rooted in the family that it was impossible for anyone to conceive of themselves as an individual. Society's sense of right and wrong was based on a system of honor and shame. The more honor a family had, the more honor its members had.

The role of a wife and mother was extremely important to the process of gaining honor. It was difficult for the man to promote himself, so the woman took care of this. A woman, be it a wife or mother, did everything she could to promote a

husband or son. This is precisely what Mary was doing at the wedding feast at Cana. She sought to preserve and increase the honor of her son.

Jesus acknowledged this as He responded to His mother with the highly respectful term, "Woman."

As we celebrate Mother's Day we might use another term that today is perhaps more descriptive than that of "promoter," that being, "mentor." Our first reading and the Gospel passage clearly reveal the vital importance of the role of a mentor.

The Acts of the Apostles, written about 85 A.D., is reflective of the fear that existed in first century Jerusalem at the time of the Apostles. The story being related about Paul takes place just a few years after the death of Jesus. There was serious unrest. Politically, a war between the Jews and Rome was on the horizon. Religiously, the Pharisees and other reformers were trying to renew Judaism. This involved expelling groups from the synagogue that did not adhere to what was judged to be the central teachings of Judaism. The followers of Jesus were one of the groups being forced out of their synagogues, and Saul was part of this.

Saul was very dangerous to the early Christian community, and he would never have been allowed near the early community of believers without a trusted person to present him. Barnabas stepped up for Saul, taking great personal risk in introducing him to the community. Acts goes on to tell us that Barnabas continued to serve as a mentor for Paul for several years. It was Barnabas who was instrumental in helping Paul come to understand the person of Jesus and Jesus' teachings. Without Barnabas, Saul/Paul certainly would not have come to love the

Lord with such understanding. Further, Barnabas helped Paul launch his missionary career.

One role of mothers has not changed all that much since the first century. We might see in mothers an example of this mentoring in their ongoing role of being advocates for their children. For many of us, it was our mothers who, like Barnabas, introduced us to a Christian community and saw to our education. We cannot dismiss fathers, but mothers certainly have a very special role.

A mother learned that her young son was being shipped out for duty in Iraq, and she became sick with worry. She couldn't bear the thought that he would be in harm's way on the other side of the world. After many tears and much prayer, she took some consolation in these words from her parish priest: "The Jesus you pray to here is the same Jesus your son will be praying to in Iraq." Those simple words helped her not only to see that her son would be in God's hands, but that even half a world away she would remain connected with her son through the mystery of faith and prayer.

Jesus makes clear the need to stay connected to the Christian community and to those who spiritually mentor us. A vine cannot bear fruit "on its own." Not only is there the need to be connected to the main vine, truly delicious grapes need the intervention of a gardener who knows where and how to prune and when to fertilize. By and large, mothers know their children better than anyone, and they know where to prune and where to fertilize.

A vine doesn't grow fruit for its own use, but to entice others to grab hold of it and carry the seed off with them. Just so, the fruit that believers bear is not meant for themselves but for the nourishment of others that they too may take the seed within—in this case, the Word—and carry it far and wide. That is why Jesus can say that God is glorified in our bearing much fruit. For it is by the fruit that Christians bear through their relationship with Jesus that new believers are grafted to the vine. Just so, the fruit that believers bear is not meant for themselves but for the nourishment of others, that they too may take the seed within (the Word!) and carry it far and wide.

As the mother in the story experienced, Jesus connects us not only to himself but also to one another. Together we form the one vine, which extends its branches throughout the world and bears fruit in love. The woman who folds her hands to pray in Tennessee draws life from the same source as the man who kneels down in Bangladesh. The teenager who visits the sick in Rio de Janeiro does so with the same love that moves a rich woman to give her coat to a homeless person in Lisbon. It is the same Jesus, who continues to be present and active throughout the world just as he promised his disciples.

We might believe deeply that Jesus rose from the dead, but Mother's Day and our readings make clear that without mentoring we cannot grow in our faith. Even so, we must also, become mentors in the faith, assisting others to grow in their belief. We must become Barnabas for others