

In a Chicken Soup book, Sandy Smith wrote how going to college was a big deal because her father passed away a few years earlier, and they were not wealthy when he was still alive. But through her mother's sacrifices, she and her siblings were not only cared for, she was still able to go to college. To make her feel like an adult, her mother even let her drive them when she moved into her dorm room that first fall. As Sandy drove, her mother asked if she had any gum. That request shocked her, however, because Sandy had never seen her mother chew gum. Never. Ever. In all 18 years of her life. And she was then downright stunned when her mother took the pack of gum out of her purse and said "*Oh, honey, this is my favorite gum. Even when I was a child, I always loved this gum.*"

As she watched her mother joyfully chew the gum, Sandy wrote that she just had to ask what the deal was with the gum, saying "*how did I not know that you chewed gum?*" But before her mother could answer, Sandy went on to share how one of her favorite childhood memories was her dad, mom, herself, two sisters, and three brothers piling into dad's pickup with mom and dad in the cab and the kids in the bed. She also shared how she remembered dad always stopping to buy 3 bottles of soda and a pack of gum - the very brand and flavor that was in her purse because of that memory. She then recalled how mom and dad would share a soda, her and her sisters another, and the boys the third. And then how mom would give the 6 kids and dad a piece of the gum. Seeing her bewilderment, her mom said "*honey, the packs only had 7 sticks.*"

The celebration of Mother's Day is not new. Ancient Greece had a day in March for a mother's festival. And in England Mothering Sunday was celebrated as far back as the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Yet it was in Philadelphia in 1907 that Ann Jarvis began Mother's Day as we know it when she had her church to honor mothers by having people wear a white carnation one morning. Ever since that first Sunday, sermons given on this day have spoken about the qualities of a good mother using passages like Proverbs 31, which says "*a wife of noble character who can find?*" and talks of how "*she watches over the affairs of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness,*" and how as a result "*her children rise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her saying: many daughters have done nobly, but you excel them all.*"

Some sermons on this Sunday have not been based on a specific passage, but on mothers in the Bible like Sarah (the wife of Abraham) and Jochabed (the mother of Miriam, Aaron, and Moses). And still other sermons have focused on the mothers of famous persons, like John Wesley's mother Susanna. In speaking about her, John wrote that "*I do not believe that any human being ever brought into the world, and carried through it a larger portion of original goodness than my dear mother. Everyone who knew her loved her, for she seemed to be made to be happy herself, and to make everyone happy within her sphere. Her understanding was as good as her heart; it is from her that I have inherited that alertness of mind and quickness of apprehension without which it would have been impossible for me to have undertaken half of what I have performed. God never blessed a human creature with a more cheerful disposition, a more generous spirit, a sweeter temper, or a tenderer heart. I remember that when I first understood what death was, and began to think of it, the most fearful thought it induced was that of losing my mother; it seemed to me more than I could bear, and I used to hope that I might die first.*"

If you think John was exaggerating, you need to know that in addition to him, Susanna raised 12 other children. Each one was educated by her until they went to school. As soon as they could speak, she taught them the Lord's Prayer. When they turned 5, she taught them the alphabet in a single day. She then moved on to teach them to read, write, and think clearly. As they grew older she taught them a catechism. In all, she spent 6 hours each day schooling them. Each child also was given time to converse with her privately. And like other people of her time she thought corporal punishment was necessary. But in quite modern thinking, she didn't spank a child if they confessed wrongdoing and promised to do better. She also set aside 3 times a day for her own devotions and prayer. In addition, one time when her husband was away for a long time, she led a Bible study that grew larger than the Sunday attendance at his Anglican church.

As we think about all the scriptures that speak of the sacrificial love of a mother, and about the sacrificial love of woman like Susanna Wesley, we may cringe because we do not see that level of love in ALL mothers. And yet, we want things to be that way. That is because we know that motherhood, even on the most subhuman levels, has nobility and beauty in it. The bird hovering over its nest and the tiger protecting her young are just two examples. For all through the animal kingdom, motherhood behaves that way: tender, passionate, nurturing - and fierce as the devil if the need to protect her young arises. In addition, all through the animal kingdom, the love of a mother does not count the cost. It risks anything, dares always, and gives everything.

And we do know those qualities to be true at times for human mothers. We have seen mothers who loved beyond question, who stood by their children unflinchingly, and who rooted for children who were not even their own. But as I said, that might also make a cringe. Especially if our own mother was not always that way. Which may lead us to question why things are that way. It may cause us to wonder why one mother can love her children, and everyone else's children, with such love that she would lay down her life for them while another can abandon, neglect, and even abuse her children. Fortunately, we do not have to remain in the dark about that question.

The passage of scripture before us gives us a clue as to what might be going on in the different ways a mother - AND INDEED EACH OF US - can live. That is because the passage explains that the sacrificial love of a mother's heart is not something that is inherent in a person, but only comes alive when a person's heart is immersed in God and His ways. It explains that the sacrificial love of a person does not increase magically, but only grows when a person's heart is continuously molded by relationship with a loving God. And it explains why each of us can only reach the point of having sacrificial love in our heart (and thereby ALWAYS act toward ALL of God's children with mercy, compassion, and kindness) when WE - like Jesus - allow God to give us the power we need to live a life of sacrificial love.

The reason for that is simple. We are all sinners. We all need to have our hearts molded by a relationship with God. And we all need to be willing to seek to have spiritual transformation happen in our lives. For it takes the presence and power of God in our lives to move beyond living in selfish and self-centered ways to respond to the difficulties, problems, and challenges of life, and not instead respond by griping, complaining, and becoming angry. The last two years of a pandemic has showed

us this fact. Some Christians willingly put on masks, observed social distancing, and did what they could do to keep those around them safe. Other railed against wearing a mask, ignored requests - and even regulations - to do things to keep others safe, and did everything they could do to show their unwillingness to think of anyone other than themselves.

We see the spirit of that first group of people in Sandy Smith's mother. When her mother said "*honey, the packs only had 7 sticks,*" Sandy instantly realized just how fully her mother had chosen to live a life of sacrificial love. That is because as they drove to college that first fall, Sandy was well aware of the big picture of how her mother had sacrificed for her children. The fact that she was going to college for her freshman year was testimony to the fact that her mom had been putting off all kinds of personal financial expenditures so she could pay her daughter's college expenses. But after hearing her mother say "*This is my favorite gum,*" and "*even when I was a child, I always loved this gum,*" the fullness of her mother's sacrificial love hit her like a ton of bricks.

That is because she realized in that moment that in addition to the "*huge sacrifices*" her mother had made to get her and her siblings through the financial difficulties the family had after her dad died, her mother - long before her dad died - had been making "*a million small sacrifices that had gone unnoticed.*" That is because for all those years her mother had been taking those 7 sticks of gum out of the wrapper, and giving a full piece to each child and her father, even though she must have been thinking "*this is my favorite gum,*" and "*even when I was a child, I always loved this gum,*" and not making anyone feel guilty for not sharing theirs with her.

On Mother's Day, we therefore remember the sacrificial love of mothers - for through their sacrificial love we have been enabled to grow up, and mature, and become who we are today. On Mother's Day, we therefore remember the sacrificial love of God - for only through God's sacrificial love can we be saved, now and for all eternity, becoming the children of God we were created to be. And on Mother's Day, we are also invited to remember that God calls EVERY ONE OF US to live a life of sacrificial love.

For only through US living out a life of sacrificial love can the world not only know we are a Christian, but see through us the Christ Himself and come to know of His love for them. That is why throughout the Bible we see statements that speak to this fact. "*Love one another as I have loved you,*" Jesus said. "*Let all you do be done in love*" the Apostle Paul wrote. And "*love one another earnestly from a pure heart,*" the Apostle Peter wrote. That is because, as the Apostle John wrote, "*God is love. [and] whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them.*"

If you think that doesn't apply as a calling on your life, however, ponder once again the passage that was read from 1 John. In that passage, the Apostle John wrote to series of people. "*I am writing to you, fathers,*" John wrote. "*I am writing to you, young men,*" John wrote. "*I am writing to you, dear children,*" John wrote. And then John said to each of those groups: "*anyone who loves their brother and sister lives in the light.*" Which given the fallen and sinful nature of our brothers and sisters would require a great deal of sacrifice. That is because people do not always act lovingly in return. And even when they want to do so, sin gets in the way and they may not act as sacrificially or

lovingly toward others as they think they are acting.

But notice who John does NOT write to: MOTHERS! Maybe that is because John understood that the one group of people who did not need to know that sacrificial love is something that should be in a person's heart is mothers. Maybe John realized that the vast majority of mothers already lived lives of sacrificial love that resulted not only in "*huge sacrifices*" that everyone sees but also "*a million small sacrifices that go unnoticed.*" And maybe John knew that he only needed to therefore write to all of us who are not mothers to remind us to make not only "*huge sacrifices,*" but also "*a million small sacrifices that go unnoticed.*"

Let us therefore celebrate this day the sacrificial love of mothers. Let us celebrate the sacrificial love of God. And let us do that celebrating by making the commitment this day, and every day to come, to live a life of sacrificial love ourselves. For it is ONLY BY THIS, Jesus said, "*that everyone will know that you are my disciples: IF YOU LOVE ONE ANOTHER.*"