The movie, *Philomena*, touched me deeply. It is the story of an unwed Irish mother banished to a convent in the early fifties because of the unspeakable shame in her belly. Apparently, in that place and time, being an unwed mother was just about the worst thing you could be.

So here’s your spoiler alert: If you haven’t seen the movie, now would be a good time to insert those ear buds you keep in your purse or lapel pocket for just such a moment! Listen to a little *Pandora* or *NPR* and get back to us shortly.

The unwed mother featured in this film is Philomena Lee. As a teenager, Philomena spent nearly four years working in the laundry of the convent where her son was born, working off her penance. She got to spend one hour a day with her son, Anthony, until that terrible day—just a week before Christmas—when he was taken from her. Philomena’s most painful memory is seeing Anthony’s bewildered, three-year-old face framed by the rear window of a departing automobile as he peered back at his mother in love and longing.

Philomena was told Anthony was taken to a good, Catholic home in America. But her efforts to contact her son were met by the stony silence of the mother superior who told her she would burn in hell if she ever told her secret.
So Philomena tucked away this painful chapter in her life, as best she could, until finally late in life, she told her daughter about her unknown brother. Thus began a quest to find Anthony with the help of a BBC journalist. In time, Philomena learned that her son became a highly placed official in the Reagan and Bush administrations. She also learned he lived a rich, full life with his partner, Pete, until Anthony--now Michael Hess--fell gravely ill and died in 1995.

Perhaps the most heart-wrenching part of the story is that Anthony had been desperately looking for his long-lost mother, even as she searched for him. He was told by convent officials his mother had abandoned him. Still, he asked to be buried on the grounds of the abbey. Never doubting his beloved mother was still looking for him, he knew if ever she was to find him, she would find him there.

So it was in a cemetery that the lost child of Philomena Lee and his heartsick mother were finally reunited. In an interview I saw online, she said of him, "I know it's a sad way to find (Anthony), . . . but knowing that he so desperately tried to find me brought some closure within my heart." Then pointing heavenward, she added, “I feel so at peace because I know he’s up there watching over me.”

Jesus says God is like the good shepherd, “who seeks the lost sheep until he finds it” (Luke 15:4). It sounds to me like the God of Jesus is a lot like Philomena Lee, at least in God’s dogged, determined, motherly love that never gives up.

It comes as a surprise to most people to discover how often God is likened to a loving, devoted mother in Holy Scripture. Somehow, I missed that in my Sunday School education. One of those texts is our Old Testament reading from Deuteronomy. There Moses chides the children of Israel for forgetting “the rock that bore you, the God who gave you birth” (Dt. 32:18).

Speaking through the prophet Isaiah, God says in a particularly gripping, Philomena Lee evoking image, “Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you” (Isaiah 49:15). No woman who has born and nursed a child can ever forget that squalling bundle of life, tugging at her breast, bone
of her bone and flesh or her flesh. Even so, God can never forget God’s beloved children.
Indeed, the Hebrew word for “compassion” shares its root with the Hebrew word for “womb,”
because there is no greater compassion or connection than that felt by an able, attentive mother
and her child.

Who can imagine the anguish of those Nigerian mothers whose daughters have been
wrested away by marauding terrorists? No wonder the world is united in its outrage, as well it
should be! Even the men among us sense the sanctity and power of a mother’s very special
bond with her child.

“See!” God exclaims through the prophet. “I have inscribed you on the palms of my
hands” (Isaiah 49:16a). Hearing those words reminds me how my own mother marveled and
delighted in the wonder that was me as her child. I hope the same is true for you.

Hosea likens God to a mother teaching her little ones to walk. “It was I who taught
Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms,” says God. “I led them with cords of human
kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent
down to them and fed them” (Hosea 11:3-4).

The prophet Isaiah captures God’s heart by saying, “As a mother comforts her child, so I
will comfort you” (Isaiah 66:13).

One of the gifts of grandparenthood is getting to revisit the miracles you missed or didn’t
fully appreciate the first time, such as seeing that very special bond that exists between my
grandson, sweet baby James, and his mother, Whitney. Yes, while playing in his tent with his
daddy, James may deny his mother entry by announcing, “No mama! No mama!” meaning
“Boys only!” In fact, that was the first two-word sentence he ever uttered: “No mama!”

But when James wants to be comforted or consoled or just plain loved, as only mothers
can, there’s no doubting whose lap he’ll land in.

What if the heavenly Abba of Jesus is indeed, the very best mommy and daddy ever
imagined or experienced, all rolled up into one? That seems to be what the whole breadth and
depth of the biblical revelation is saying . . . if we have a sufficiently daring faith to receive so wondrous a gift.

Listen to Jesus as he probes the depths of God’s dogged, determined, yet often helpless love: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” (Luke 13:34). Like a mother hen, gathering her chicks under her wings to protect them from a circling hawk, or a fox like Herod (v. 32), Jesus longs to protect Jerusalem from the calamity that is coming. He knows the city of David is on a collision course with Roman imperialism and justice. But in rejecting Jesus’ message of God’s restless, relentless love, God’s people are refusing the very refuge God longs to give.

That’s one of the hardest things about being a mother, or so I’m told: giving one’s growing, maturing child room to be him or herself, even when mama knows some costly mistakes are in the offing.

A while back, one of our mothers shared with me what her struggles as a mom had taught her about divine powerlessness. She so wanted to give her daughter the benefit of her wisdom and experience, while her daughter, on the cusp of young womanhood, wanted to go it alone. It was then that this mother grasped intuitively, God’s own costly brand of love that gives us room to be ourselves. Here is her confession:

I felt like Jacob, wrestling over and over with God about whether I could trust (God) enough to take care of (my daughter). Handing over control that I don’t even have is a big challenge for me! Finally, after agonizing over how powerless I felt to ‘help’ . . . , I began to realize that God chooses powerlessness. God could make situations and wrongs and people right because God has that power, and yet he sometimes chooses not to.

I guess I always saw God as saying, ‘Oh, just get over it already!’ and not feeling much pain over these situations. But how can a loving parent not feel the pain that their child feels? . . . Of course, I still get frustrated that (God) doesn't sign off on the plans and pleas I have for my children, but I'm slowly learning to be a wee bit more accepting of his love and wisdom towards them.
In Jesus’ plaintive cry for Jerusalem, we hear the anguish of God’s own rejected love. “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem . . . How I longed to draw you close as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you were not willing.”

“How I longed!” says Jesus, “but you were not willing.”

But thankfully, God is not just a mother hen, yearning to provide an oft rejected refuge. God is also, says the prophet Hosea, a fierce mother bear protecting her cubs (Hosea 11:8). God is also a mother eagle teaching her eaglets to fly. Today’s lesson from Deuteronomy offers this beautiful image of God: “As an eagle stirs up its nest and hovers over its young; as it spreads its wings, takes them up and bears them aloft on its pinions, so the Lord alone guided (Israel)” [Dt. 32:11-12a].

Here the writer draws on the image of a mother eagle giving her fledglings flying lessons. The little ones have no inclination to leave the safety and comfort of their nest until mama decides it’s time for them to test their wings. So the mother eagle pecks and nudges with her beak, pushing her babies from their fragile perch atop some cliff top precipice. If necessary--as the text from Deuteronomy suggests--the mother eagle takes her eaglets aloft in her pinions and then drops them from a soaring height. This forces the eagles in training to test their wings only to discover the canyon gusts, like grace, are eager to bear them up.

But if there is a stubborn or slow learner in the bunch who plummet like a stone, the mother eagle rescues that one with her pinions or lets it land upon her strong, sturdy back. But not so she can deliver it back to the nest. Only so she can carry that eaglet to an even loftier height where it will be dropped again and again, until it learns to fly.

The best mothers, like God, both nurture and test, grow and stretch their children. They don’t resort to that old canard from my childhood, “Just you wait till your daddy gets home!” No, a good mother is more than adequate to manage loving discipline all by herself.
In Lorraine Hansberry’s play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, an African-American mother is wrestling with her adolescent daughter who now professes atheism. “Mama,” says the daughter. “You just don’t understand. God is one idea I don’t accept . . . There is simply no blasted God.”

With firmness of voice and character, this strong, stately mother answers, “I want you to repeat after me: ’In my mother’s house, there is still God.’”

After a long, tense pause, the daughter slowly relents. “In my mother’s house,” she acknowledges, “there is still God.”

God as *Abba*, the motherly father of Jesus, is a God like that: a God who is both mother hen and mother eagle; a God who not only holds us precious but holds us accountable.

In fact, *Abba* is more and more my preferred word for God. In Jesus’ native tongue of Aramaic, *Abba* was a toddler’s word for her father. It fell soft from the palette, much like *dada* and *mama* do in English. The early believers were so stunned by Jesus’ use of such an intimate, homely word for God as *Abba*, they never forgot the sound of it. Even in the Greek New Testament, that precious, Aramaic word from Jesus’ own tongue is preserved. As Paul sings in Galatians, “And because you are God’s children, God has sent the spirit of the Son into our heart, crying, Abba, Father!” (Galatians 4:6).

But the beauty of that word, *Abba*, at least for me, is that it gathers up both the motherly and fatherly dimensions of the divine being: the nurturing and the testing, the protecting and the risking; the mother hen, for sure, but also the mother bear and the mother eagle.

After all, Jesus’ most unforgettable picture of God as the father of the prodigal son is quite unlike any father I ever knew (Luke 15:11-24). Rather, in running toward the rebellious son, robe flapping in the wind and tears streaming down his face, ever ready to forgive and never giving up, the prodigal’s daddy seems more like a mama to me.

“Father” is a decidedly masculine word for God, but *Abba*, not so much. Abba sounds as much like *mama* as *dada* which, knowing Jesus, was no accident. He knew God was *both*. As
master preacher Fred Craddock confessed, “When first I heard God’s voice, it sounded like the voice of my mother.”

Yes, God’s love is a determined, dogged love like that of Philomena Lee or the motherly father of the prodigal son, which means God is never going to give up on you. But maybe instead of running so hard in the other direction, you might finally take refuge under God’s welcoming wings where for you, as for the Psalmist, the prayer might at last prove: “Guard me as the apple of the eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings” (Psalm 17:8).

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