**It's Just *Tricky***

By Margot Starbuck

*"God couldn't be everywhere, so he gave us mothers."* The church signboard I passed on my morning walk rattled me. Is God always so sorely limited? Did God *give* the addicted mother of the passing driver who beat her children?And this from a church secretary who truly *meant well*.

Those of us who lead worship also *mean well*. And yet honoring mothers in worship on Mother's Day can be, and usually is, equally dicey.

As an adopted person, and a mama by birth and adoption, I'm keenly aware of the many women in the pews around me who don't get to wear a red rose on their lapels and stand sheepishly to be honored. Some are the friends I hold in my heart who would *love* to be moms, but—for various reasons—are not. Some have been unable to conceive. Some have had abortions. Others never married. Without ever meaning to, I filter every word of even the *best* Mother's Day liturgies through their ears.

I also remember the visible, and invisible, birth moms. Adoptive moms may offer a prayer of gratitude for those who carried our children—*their* children—into the world. For many of us these mothers may, by default, remain nameless and faceless. Others we can pray for by name.

But there are also the mothers in our pews who were shuttled away to homes for unwed mothers, in the 1950s and 60s and 70s, giving birth alone and returning home with empty arms. Assured that they'd "forget" and "move on," these mothers *never forgot*. Whether or not they stand to be recognized, the child they'll be thinking of, as pew neighbors are clapping, will be the ones they never held. Many will be among the many women sitting at home because Mother's Day—no matter how well it's handled in worship—is simply too painful.

The practicalities for pastors and worship leaders of recognizing and honoring *all* mothers, is altogether *wily*. It's hard.

As a nation, we've often *glorified* motherhood. The pieces of my unique story—being raised by a mother who'd lost her own mother as a toddler—fell into place, oddly enough, while browsing through popular women's magazines from the 1940s and 50s. As a nation desperately tried to regain "normalcy" in the wake of war, the idealized mothers symbolized the domestic anchor of stability. "Perfect" mothers, a la June Cleaver, raised perfect children, who were fed infant formula and Corn Flakes, and kept perfect homes—ideally wielding a shiny new Hoover vacuum cleaner. That perfect mother is the one who guided my grandmother as she raised the girl who raised me. Even today we can still cling to an idealized, and often unattainable, version of motherhood.

So, keenly aware of my own imperfections, I'll likely squirm on Mother's Day if praise is lauded on those of us who have raised, or are raising, children. For days, television ads will have featured glimpses of sacrificial mothers who ask for no more than a four-dollar greeting card as thanks for squeezing out a kid, changing his diapers, preparing meals and cleaning toilets. Though I've grudgingly done all those things, the more pressing awareness with which I live—and perhaps my children do as well!—is of the areas where I fail. Like all mothers, I do the best I can. Sometimes I succeed. So while I'll probably bristle at any prayers blanketing me as the giver of noble sacrificial mother-love, I'll find myself included in ones that ask God to help mothers love like He loved us. Especially when we fail.

Bottom line: mentioning Mother's Day in worship is just tricky. There's no formula. So perhaps we acknowledge that most families are messy. Or maybe we make a mental note to also mention birth moms on one of the other fifty-one Sundays of the year. Perhaps we simply admit that it's a difficult day for many. Or we acknowledge that God is keenly aware of all that we hold in our hearts. On Mother's Day, the best we can do is to keep it real.

*Margot Starbuck wrote her most recent book, Not Who I Imagined: Surprised by a Loving God, for people who want to glimpse God's gracious countenance because they were raised by regular fallible mothers and fathers. Connect at*[*www.MargotStarbuck.com*](http://www.margotstarbuck.com/)*or on*[*Facebook*](https://www.facebook.com/margotstarbuck)*.*