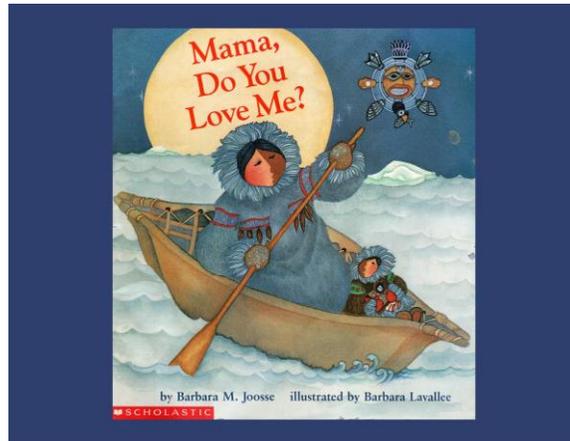


The Rev. Christine Mendoza
The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd
The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, August 21, 2016
Jeremiah 1:4-10 and Luke 18:15-17

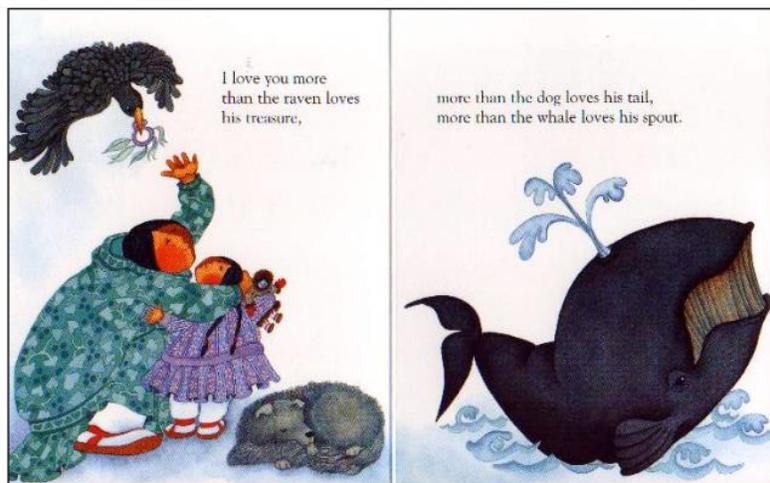


There is a wonderful book for young children called, *Mama, do you love me?* Written by Barbara Joosse and illustrated by Barbara Lavallee, it is a story about an Inuit mother and daughter and it speaks to the unconditional love of a parent for her child. In this story, the daughter (referred to only as “Dear One”) is trying to feel out the boundaries of this love.

The story opens with the young daughter asking her mother, “Mama, do you love me?” To which the mother replies, “Yes, I do, Dear One.”

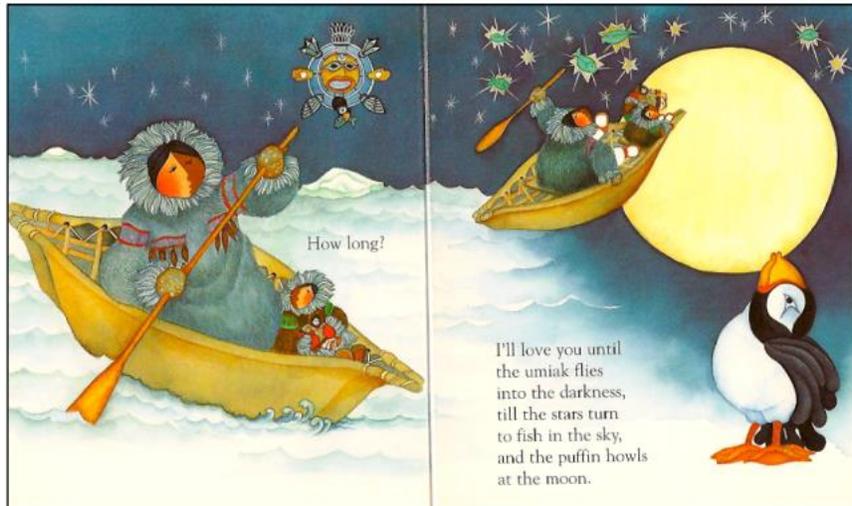
The daughter then asks, “How much?”

“I love you more than the raven loves his treasure, more than the dog loves his tail, more than the whale loves his spout.”



She asks, “How long?”

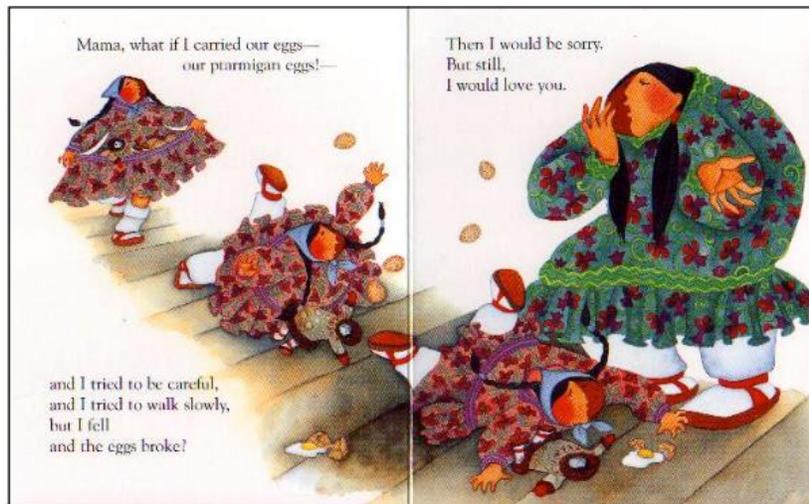
“I’ll love you until the umiak flies into the darkness, till the stars turn to fish in the sky, and the puffin howls at the moon.”



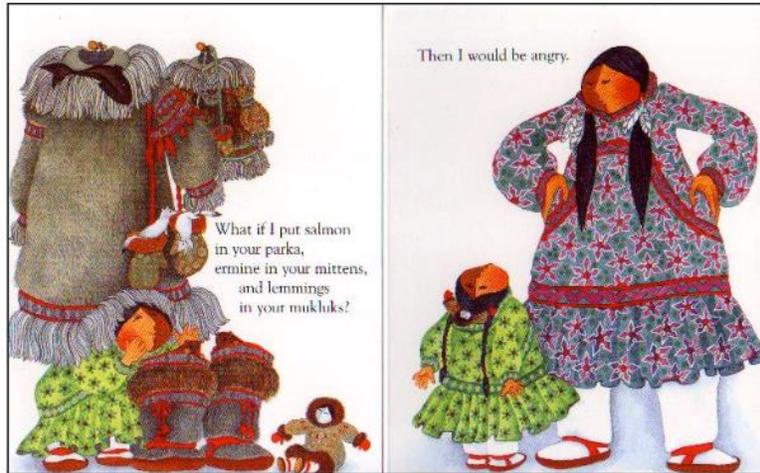
The daughter knows her mother is saying that her love is boundless and eternal, but these are hard things for young children to understand. So, she then asks her mother the “But what if...?” questions, exploring the possible limits of this parental love. And, each of these “but what if” questions is followed by an implied, “will you still love me?”

She asks, “Mama, what if I carried our eggs – our ptarmigan eggs! – and tried to be careful, and I tried to walk slowly, but I fell and the eggs broke?”

The mother replies, “Then I would be sorry. But still, I would love you.”

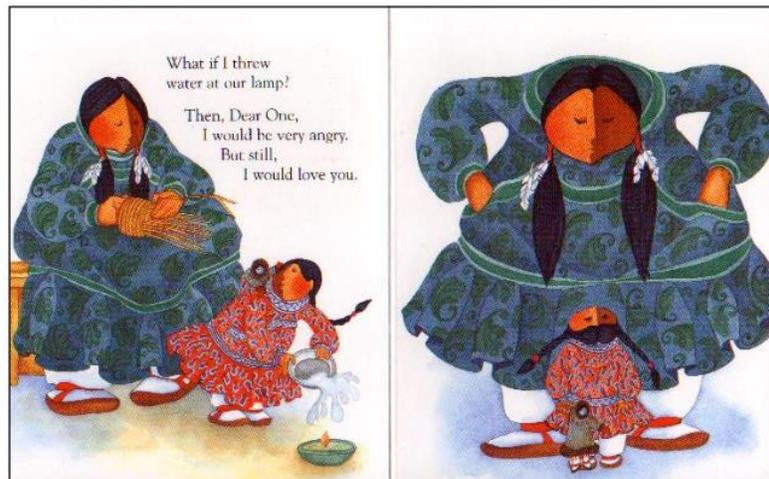


“What if I put salmon in your parka, ermine in your mittens, and lemmings in your mukluks?”
 “Then I would be angry.”



“What if I threw water at our lamp?”

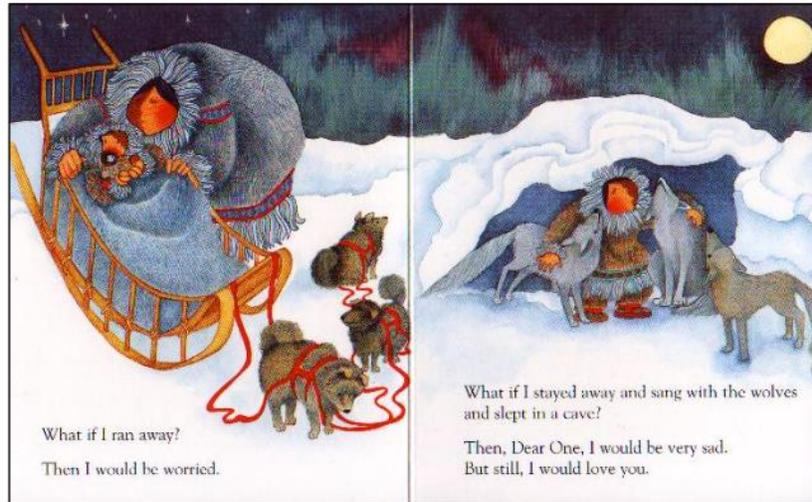
“Then, Dear One, I would be very angry. But still I would love you.”



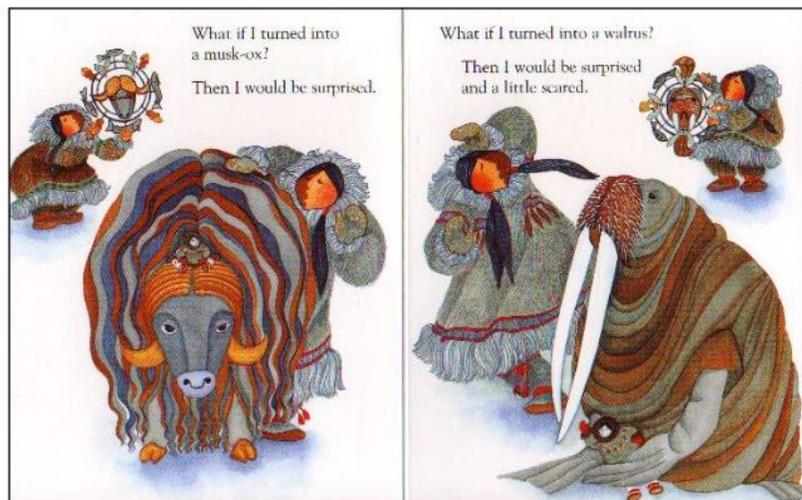
The daughter continues to push out the possible boundaries and asks, “What if I ran away?”
To which the mother replies, “Then I would be worried.”

“What if I stayed away and sang with the wolves and slept in a cave?”

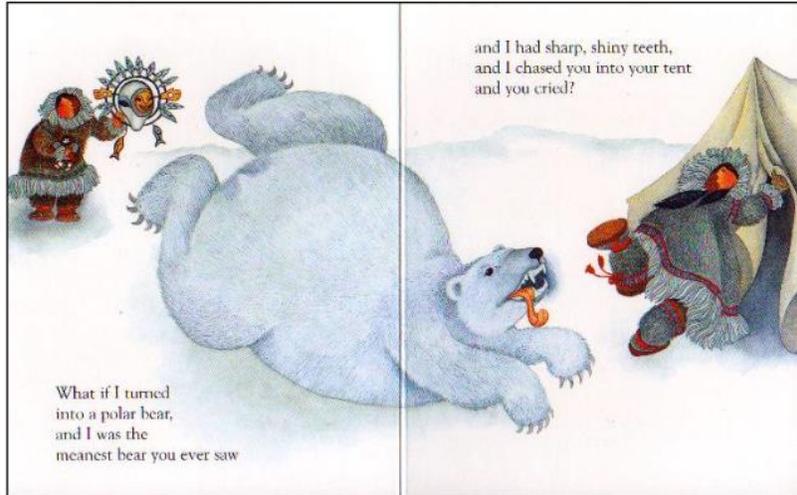
“Then, Dear One, I would be very sad. But still, I would love you.”



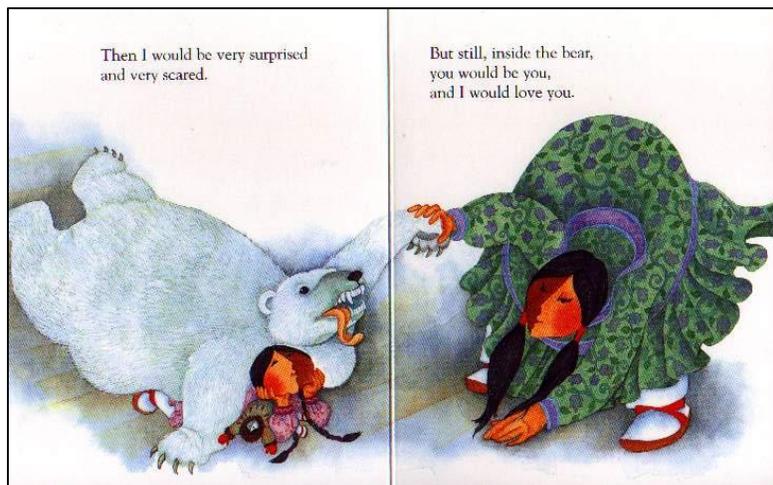
“What if I turned into a musk-ox?”
 “Then I would be surprised.”
 “What if I turned into a walrus?”
 “Then I would be surprised and a little scared.”



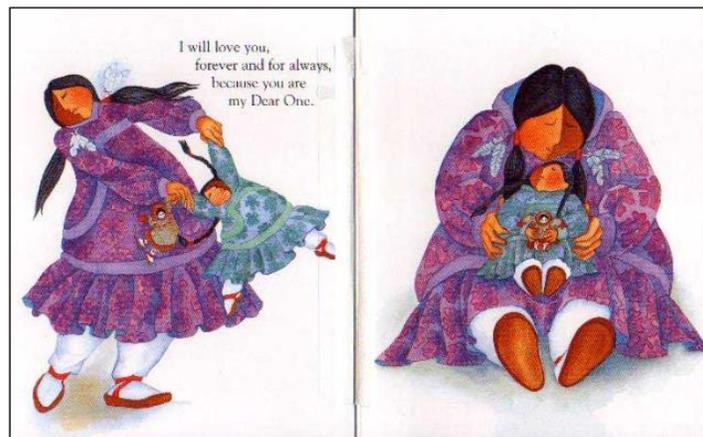
Now the daughter pushes the boundary as far out as she can imagine, asking “What if I turned into a polar bear and I was the meanest bear you ever saw and I had sharp, shiny teeth, and I chased you into your tent and you cried?”



And the mother replies, “Then I would be very surprised and very scared. But still, inside the bear, you would still be you, and I would love you.”



“I will love you, forever and for always, because you are my Dear One.”



This story addresses important questions about the nature of parental love: What is this love and where are the boundaries? What are the conditions for receiving this love? Just how safe am I in this love? For me, the most important part of the story is when the daughter asks the ultimate question: what if I changed into something unrecognizable, would you still love me? And the mother's response is "But still, inside the bear, you would be you, and I would love you." Even more, she is saying, "But still, I know you so deeply that I will always see you, regardless of what you've done or your life circumstances. You can never not be known and recognized by me. This is the you that I love and will always love."

In our first lesson today, we hear of God calling Jeremiah to be his prophet. This lesson contains one of my favorite lines of scripture. The word of the Lord came to him saying, "*Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you...*"

As most often is the case when people are called by God, Jeremiah balks, saying, "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." Effectively, Jeremiah is saying what nearly everyone across time has said in response to God's call: "Who am I to do this? Surely, not me. If you really knew me, you wouldn't ask." God's response is also consistent, "Yes, you. I know who you are. I see you inside that bear and I love you. I will give you all that you need, when you need it, in order to be the person I am calling you to be. The person I knew when I created you and formed you in the womb."

In these few short verses, God sings his eternal love song to Jeremiah, and to us all, proclaiming not only his love but also that, like in our Inuit story, this parental love comes from God's *deep knowing* of us. When we object, asking, "Who am I? How can I possibly be worthy?" God simply replies, "I know you – I have always known you – and I love you. And no matter what, you are still you – you are my Dear One."

Isn't that what we all are seeking - to know and be known? To be loved not for our good deeds or our pleasing personality traits...but because we are known...fully and truly? To be seen and known with clear and gracious eyes and hearts, rather than by judgments of our worthiness? But this knowing may also feel threatening. To be truly known, is to expose our whole selves – the good and the less-than-good. To be known means we must let down our guard and drop our masks. To be known means we must let God and others see the parts we try to hide away in our dark and dusty corners. Of course, God already knows us fully, it is our foolishness that allows us to believe we are able to hide the parts we judge as unworthy. Indeed, it is in this deep knowing by God that our true worthiness is grounded. We are collectively worthy of God's love because we are his children, and we are *individually* worthy of God's love because we are *known*.

Like the little girl in the Inuit story, we, too, are loved not because of what we do or the goodness of our character. Rather, we are loved because of who we are (the beloved that lies beneath and behind our actions and personality) and because of who God is (the one who creates and knows his creatures). It is our essential nature to love and be loved; to know and be known. And we make ourselves deeply unhappy when we live lives outside of our nature.

And yet, it can be difficult to accept this absolute love. We want to believe in God's eternal grace but sometimes the longer we live and the more we recognize our own failings we find this troublesome. Like the daughter in our story, we want to ask God, "But what if I mess up, will you still love me? What if I do something bad? What if I turn my back on you and leave? What if I become someone so flawed I am hardly recognizable....will you still love me?"

We want to ask these questions and yet we are afraid of what the answers will be. The divine irony, of course, is that it is in asking that we may be set free from our fears. It is in falling that may find ourselves to have been supported all along. And it is in surrender to what we fear may be only a paltry love that we realize just how full and absolute God's love is – how it has ever been and ever will be. And we find the God who knew us – and loved us – even before we were knit in the womb.

In our Gospel lesson, crowds have been forming around Jesus and parents are bringing their children to him to receive his blessing. The disciples tell them to stay back but Jesus calls them forward, saying, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them." I like to imagine many of these children being uncertain at first and a bit resistant, but then as they came near Jesus they sensed the abiding and loving presence of God. And, breaking free of their parent's grasps, they run to Jesus with arms outstretched.

Young children know love and safety instinctively, don't they? One of my fondest memories is of tiny baby Emma falling asleep on my chest, and that precious weight of her little body entirely given over to me trusting that I would protect her and keep her safe. I think also of how, as a toddler, she would run to me and throw herself against me, arms and legs wrapping around me. Young children know this love and they run to it with complete trust and abandon.

So, too, it is must be with us. Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." It is with radically open and receptive hearts that we receive and live in God's kingdom. It is when we have the courage – or sometimes when we have no other alternative left – to give ourselves fully to God and trust in our being known, that we can experience the salvation of God's love.

The keys to the God's kingdom are not good deeds or pure hearts, but the radical trust and acceptance of a child who knows herself to be known and loved. Like the mother from our story, God eternally calls us with this love song, "I will love you, forever and for always, because *you* are my Dear One."

Amen.