

A Tribute to Mother
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I want to thank all of you for your kindness during my mother's illness and passing. Your care and concern has given us the strength to come through this difficult time.

It is my task and my honor to pay tribute to my mother on behalf of my family. First, please indulge me while I say a word about myself. I am Assistant Professor of Christian Ethics at Andover Newton Theological School in Newton Centre, Massachusetts. Andover Newton is the oldest graduate theological school in the United States, and I am the first African-American woman to be appointed to a tenured or tenure track faculty position there. In 1998 when I defended my Ph.D. dissertation under the supervision of Dr. Katie Cannon, it was the first time in the history of Christendom that an African-American woman had supervised the Ph.D. dissertation of another African-American woman in the area of religious studies. I tell you this because all I am and ever hope to be is because of God and my parents, especially my mother.

I am a scholar in no small measure because my mother taught me the value of study, and scholarship begins with a question. Scholarly method proceeds from a question to a process for locating answers to questions, to finding solutions to problems. As we would say on the street: "If you don't know, you better ask somebody." When we had a question or a problem we could talk it over with my mother.

I am a womanist ethicist. As an ethicist my inquiry begins with two primary questions: what is right to do? And how do you know? As a womanist I do not necessarily begin to answer ethical questions by reading the European philosophical and theological cannon. Womanist scholars look for answers in our own mother's gardens. We begin by consulting the lifework and the wisdom of African

and African-American women and men. My mother's life, work and wisdom are rich sources for knowing what is right to do.

Most African-American scholars who work in the area of religion, theology and ethics understand the debt we owe to women and men such as my mother who work tirelessly, day in day out, year in, year out teaching in Sunday School, in Vacation Bible School, and in other venues of Christian education. We are not unmindful of our responsibility to produce scholarship that is aimed not only to enhance our own reputations among our academic peers, but also to produce scholarship that is useful in the local church.

Ethics teaches us to not only do the right thing, but also the importance of doing the right thing for the right reasons.

My mother's life of consistent, persistent, dedicated service in any activity to which she committed herself is an example of doing the right thing for the right reason. In a world where we worry about burnout, about exhaustion, my mother did not know the meaning of such. She did not get tired of teaching, she did not get tired of any of the service she rendered because she was clear about the reasons for her teaching, the reasons for her service. The reason for her service was to first give glory to God, to learn to live in right relationship with God and with each other.

She lived her life and performed her service from a deep wellspring of love, a wellspring that was continuously renewed through worship. And because she loved us with the love of God, she did not get tired of loving us, even when we were impossible to love. I quote my cousin Rev. Carmen Williams: "She loved the hell out of me." She not only loved the hell out of one of us, but she loved the hell out of many of us and we can be a hellacious bunch.

My mother's love, her ethics, her study of the Bible, caused her to care not only for the people she knew, but for people she did not know. Jesus taught: "... in as much as you did it to the least of these, you did it unto me." (Matt. 25:40) She was committed to the food pantry because she was concerned about the poor; she was concerned about the least among us, and she was no respecter of persons. She treated everyone with dignity and with respect.

Her study also led her to understand the responsibility that the great commission places upon committed Christians -- "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things I have commanded you," (Matt: 28: 19-20) My mother taught discipleship, stewardship and evangelism not only by recitation of a collection of Biblical facts, she taught these things through her living. Her Christian witness was not one of condemnation that threatened people with everlasting damnation, a judgment that belongs only to God, but her Christian witness was one of love and of encouragement. She reminded us that we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us.

And so today we are here to celebrate her living and to mourn her passing. But praise be to God that we are not without a hope. We will see her again. In the meanwhile, we will continue our work down here until our race is run. We will continue our work knowing that she is among a great cloud of witnesses that is cheering us on.

So let us go forth from this place, this day re-committed to serve as she served, to love as she loved, to witness as she witnessed, to let our little lights shine, to make a contribution to humanity and to the world. Let us leave this place committed to honor my mother's work and witness. Let us leave this place committed to honor God.

