

**MOTHERS IN LAW**  
**A SERMON BY GEORGE E. BLAIR III, FEBRUARY 5, 2012**  
**FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF ANCHORAGE, ALASKA**

**Old Testament Reading:**           **Isaiah 40: 21-31**

**New Testament Reading:**       **Mark 1: 29-34**

**Dear Miss Manners:** I have just returned home from spending a few days with my son (36) and daughter-in-law (34). My daughter-in-law's mother has been gone for 15 years, so I sometimes try to give her advice to help her.

It seems this has not been appreciated. I disagreed with their decision to move away from their hometown, but they had repeatedly invited me to come, so I did. The guest room, as well as the entire house, was oddly decorated. My daughter-in-law painted the guest room walls a pale green, a color I do not enjoy. My daughter-in-law is a tall girl and often wears heels, and even though I said it was inappropriate, she just smiled and changed the subject but did not change her shoes. They offered to take me to museums or shops or local sites of interest, but they didn't even have a specific activity planned. They took me to dinner once, and they cooked dinner for me the next night.

I sat them down and said it was clear they did not really want me to visit, and my son actually said they had worked hard to make me comfortable and that they had hoped this would be a fun visit. Then my son said that if all I wanted to do was criticize, then maybe I should not come back.

I cannot believe that a girl I have cared for has turned my son against me, and I am at a loss at how I should deal with her in the future. She had the gall to tear up during the discussion, as if to make my son feel bad for her!

**Gentle Reader** So you are the one responsible for giving mothers-in-law such a bad name! Miss Manners always wondered why so much venom is directed against ladies who are, after all, somewhat responsible for producing a presumably beloved spouse. Now she knows.

Would you like to have a houseguest who sneers at your taste in decorating and clothing, who considers it an effrontery to be offered a choice of activities and to be

taken to dinner as well as cooked for at home, and who mocks tears as being a contemptible ploy?

Your son has offered you a reasonable choice. And your daughter-in-law was not the person who turned him against you.

Two Jewish women were sitting under hair dryers at the hairdresser.

The first lady says, "So nu, how's your family?"

The second one responds, "Oh just fine. My daughter is married to the most wonderful man. She never has to cook, he always takes her out. She never has to clean, he got her a housekeeper. She never has to work, he's got such a good job. She never has to worry about the children, he got her a nanny."

She continues with a question to the first lady, "So how is your son these days?"

The first woman says, "Just awful. He is married to such a witch of a woman. She makes him take her out to dinner every night, she never cooks a dish. She made him get her a housekeeper, G-d forbid she should vacuum a carpet! He has to work like a dog because she won't get a job and she never takes care of their children, because she made him get her a nanny!"

So Peter invites Jesus over to his house in Capernaum. I've seen this house, small by our standards, but well-off by 1<sup>st</sup> century standards. Apparently, as was not uncommon in ages past, his mother-in-law lived with him and his wife, and his mother-in-law was apparently responsible for the cooking. So Peter must have been a little embarrassed, because Jewish hospitality, then as now, demanded that food be provided in abundance for any visiting guest.

Apparently, Andrew, Simon's brother, also lived in that tiny home. We never learn the name of Peter's wife—the only way we know he was married is because he had a mother-in-law, which goes with the territory. Andrew and Simon explained to Jesus that mom was sick, and Jesus went into her room (not a mother-in-law apartment) took her by the hand and dragged (I mean, lifted) her out of bed. The fever left her (we are told) and she began to serve them.

Peter's mother-in-law was not the first woman to drag herself from a sick-bed to serve a group of men who wouldn't cook for themselves. We don't know where Peter's

wife was, but we know there were three men there who could have started dinner. But mom did the cooking. Mom did the serving. Mom took care of the thirty-year old boys.

All of this isn't in the story of course. Mark tells it as a straight-forward healing story. I am reading a little between the lines, because I was struck that the mother-in-law's welfare is nowhere addressed in the story; the important thing to Mark the male author and Simon and Peter and Jesus, the men in the story, is that she was now well enough to "serve them."

Was it in gratitude for Jesus' healing of her? The text doesn't say she "served Jesus." She served "them." The men. And she probably got little thanks.

Despite the flurry of mother-in-law jokes and the mother-in-law from hell in Miss Manner's column (perhaps this letter is a hoax—although I am assured there are mothers like this), most mothers-in-law are like most mothers—a source of caring for their children and a suspicion that their own wonderful child could have gotten a better spouse if only he or she had been a little more patient. But parents among us—face it. Is anyone good enough for our children? Can we possibly set aside the nagging feeling that our child is settling for less than they deserve?

Well, actually we can, and most do, but the exceptional parent who cannot let go of their child and let them be a grownup, who cannot appreciate the spouse their child has chosen to be with—that parent becomes the butt of in-law jokes. And as society remains misogynistic—can you remember the last father-in-law joke you heard?—the butt of the jokes is usually the mom.

Did you know that if you rearrange the letters of mother-in-law they spell "woman Hitler?" Father-in-law produces "fatal whiner." And also "near halfwit," but I've never heard a comic take note of that. The mother-in-law is an easy laugh line—a throwaway joke, and if mothers felt underappreciated before, they certainly do now.

Some feel so underappreciated that they sue their daughter-in-law comic. Sundra Croonquist made one too many joke at the expense of her mother-in-law. She is being sued accused of spreading false, defamatory and racist lies with in-law jokes—this is what happens when a mixed race Swedish/African Catholic girl marries a nice Jewish boy. If you are a comic, that is rich stuff for comedy. Unfortunately, and oddly enough, not all people enjoy being made fun of. Go figure.

As someone who has been widowed twice and married four times, I can personally assure you that having four sets of in-laws is not as much fun as it sounds. But mothers-in-law come with the territory, and at risk of being too personal, I have a lesson to share.

My fourth mother-in-law was, at the time I married her only daughter, recently widowed and grieving the loss of her only husband after 58 years of marriage. Her daughter, divorced, and her husband-to-be, also divorced, invited her to celebrate our marriage on October 26, 1996. She made it very clear to Michele that she would never attend our wedding, and wanted nothing to do with me. I was divorced, protestant, and minister, and didn't even have the saving grace to be Italian.

For the first two years of our marriage, I dutifully drove my wife to Brooklyn to see her mother, and waited downstairs while she visited. I got to know other people in her building, but did not see mother. I assured Michele, however, that eventually mom would warm to me, when she saw that I made her happy. "I'm not so sure," she replied. "After all, Italians invented the word 'vendetta.'"

But one day, I was summoned into her presence, and thus began a friendship that lasted until she died, at the age of 96. I recall when Michele and I announced that we were adopting a son—she looked puzzled, and asked why we were doing such a thing. Michele started to explain about my daughter not being able to care for the child she was carrying, when her mother waved her off—"oh, it's family", she said. Family was reason enough.

Ultimately, as parents, we want our children to be happy. We are sometimes puzzled and confused by the choices they make. But we are surprised that what makes us happy is not what makes them happy; most of us, if we are stable, accept that they are not us—that our children can be happy, fulfilled human beings with or without the person they choose to spend their lives.

By the way, an anagram for "Love your mother" is just another anagram for "Every Humor tool." Kind humor tools, please. All love is from God, and a mother's love is precious.

I miss you, mom.