

This can be a loving gesture, or a hovering gesture - or both. Such technology, in other words, can be yet another tool in the hands of what we've come to call a "helicopter parent." This is the mom (or dad) who's always hovering and buzzing the child - controlling, manipulating, directing and micro-managing the child's life.

But, this is Mother's Day, and we're not about criticizing Moms! Today we want to honor moms, and to talk about moms; but we also want to talk about God. That's why you have to wonder if most people think of God as a "helicopter God" - always buzzing around, controlling and interfering.

Or might there be another way to think about mom and about God? How about a "hand-on-the-string" mom. A "hand-on-the-string" God. Reflecting on the expression "helicopter parent," Rabbi David Wolpe of Los Angeles' Sinai Temple proposes a new variation: "helium parenting." In Rabbi Wolpe's words: "We should hold on to our children as a child holds a balloon. Let them rise, float on their own, but keep a grasp on the string so that they do not float away to unknown parts. The time will come when we need to release the balloon, but, in the meantime, instead of hovering from above, we should be holding lightly from below. Think of it as parental string theory."

The outcome of this style of parenting, Wolpe continues, is different: "So often we forget that we are not trying to create 'good kids,' but competent, kind adults. Self-reliance is the fruit of practice, nurtured by failure, encouraged by appropriate risk. Coddle a kid and you get a coddled kid. Let them soar and you get an adult."

Now, turn the tables. What if, instead of talking about kids in schools or homes, we were talking about ourselves? And what if the educator or mom were not our teachers or parents, but God? What sort of maternal oversight do we prefer the Almighty to exercise over us?

Some of us are inclined to visualize God as the consummate helicopter parent: always hovering overhead, training a spotlight on us to highlight our misdeeds. This is a stern, judgmental ruler, the ultimate

micromanager: surveying our lives with disapproval, swift to mete out punishment.

Yet, what if God is more like Wolpe's concept of a *helium mom*, holding gently to the end of a string as we dance on the wind-currents? Thankfully, God doesn't seem all that interested in micromanaging our lives. To the contrary, the Lord seems content to leave us alone for long periods, with only the lightest of tugs on the balloon string. Sometimes that touch is imperceptible, barely there. At other times - episodes of trouble or temptation, in particular - we may suddenly feel a strong pull on the line, calling us back into closer relationship.

Truth is, our gospel text tells us how we want God to mother us and it tells us how we want God to take care of us: with love. And not just any kind of love, but **a love that is specific to you**. *You did not choose me but I chose you* (v. 16). We love it when mom chooses us, singles us out for some love and praise. Jesus says that we, too, were chosen by him, even as God chose Jesus.

It's a love that gives us a job. We loved it when mom gave us a job, didn't we? We loved it when she asked us to help her, to work side by side with her - whether it was helping to bake some cookies, or to put our finger in the string when she was tying a knot on some packages, didn't matter. We loved it. We weren't crazy about doing chores, but we did them because we knew we should, and it helped mom! God loves us this way, too. We are tasked with helping God with the chores, to *bear fruit - fruit that will last* (v. 16).

It's a love in which we remain. *Now remain in my love*, the text says (v. 9). Jesus says we remain in his love when we obey his commands (v. 10). So, in one sense, God's love is conditional. Mom loved us this way, too. We remained in her love as long as we weren't bad. And she knew when we were bad, no matter how hard we tried to conceal it. And we felt badly when we knew that she knew!

But, on the other hand, there's a sense in which we can never be outside of God's love, even as we were never outside of mom's love. Yes, she got

upset with us. Yes, we exasperated her on many an occasion. Yes, she put us in "timeout." But, we were always in her love. And, we are always in the love of God. Read Romans 8:35-39: nothing can separate us from God's love.

It's a love that asks us to play nice and share. *This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you* (v. 12). At the end of the reading, Jesus says it again: *This is my command: love each other* (v. 17). Can't you hear mom asking us to play nice? "Be nice to your brother!" "Take your sister with you." Well, God loves us this way, too. God loves us enough to ask us to share the love with others.

It's a love that is sacrificial. *No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life* (v. 13). When we think about all that mom did for us, it's amazing. Is God's love any less? Did not God in Jesus Christ lay down his life for us?

All of this is suggestive, not of a helicopter God, but a helium God, a God whose hand is on the string. We feel the tug at times. We sense the slack at other times. But we always know the hand is there.

The relationship we have (or have had) with our moms - indeed, to any parental figure in our lives - is complex. This is no less true of our relationship with God, a relationship based on love, requiring a firm, but gentle, hand on the balloon line.

Our spiritual relationship with God is often experienced in similar ways. At times we may feel God hovering, and at other times we feel the hand on the string, gently letting us rise.

In any case, on Mother's Day, we give thanks for those people in our lives who have been willing to make such a sacrifice, for our sake.

Sources:

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- Wolpe, David. "Helium parenting," *The Huffington Post Website*. March 13, 2012. Huffingtonpost.com. Retrieved December 3, 2014.

The Helium God

Mother's Day, May 10, 2015

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

John 15:9-17

"I just checked in on [my daughter] in school via the webcam. There was a little girl sitting in the corner, by herself, with her head down. I watched my daughter get up from the group she was playing with, and walk over to check on the little girl. [She] talked to her for a minute, gave her a hug, then took her over to the big group of kids, and encouraged her to play with everyone. If that's not a 'Proud Mommy Moment,' I don't know what is. My gosh, I am so in love with this girl of mine!"

So writes an enthusiastic young mother on Facebook, brimming with justifiable pride in her preschooler's love of neighbor. Her parenting experience is not new: Generations of mothers before her have marveled at their children's emerging personalities and their growing capacity for caring.

What is new about this mother's experience is the particular way she observed her daughter's behavior. She simply turned on her computer and watched the live feed from the classroom.

Ask any elementary school teacher and you'll find how swiftly things have changed. Gone are the days when, from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., parents entrusted their children's education exclusively to their teachers. Electronic technology has rendered classroom walls strangely transparent. A new generation of parents relies on technology to shadow their offspring, venturing across the once-sacrosanct boundary between home and school.

This particular technology is not yet widespread, but it's there, and it's becoming more common. Some day care centers use this tool, and it's also used on school buses in some areas. Parents can check in on their children at any time.