

Mother's Day: It's More than Flowers

Most pastors, if they are honest, will admit that Mother's Day is not an easy day for preaching. The trend within progressive churches is a sharp move away from celebrating Mother's Day in worship and with good reason. First, it is not a liturgical holiday: Christmas, Ash Wednesday, Good Friday, Easter, Pentecost – all of these are religious holidays, part of the liturgical year. Mother's Day is not.

So most of us pastors treat it like we do Memorial Day or Veterans' Day, other holidays that are national and not religious. We mention the holiday and the related people in our prayers, and then we go back to the lectionary for our sermon. That's what I have tried to do through the years.

But the other reason for not preaching about motherhood on Mother's Day is more complex. On any given Sunday, it is difficult to satisfy the needs of everyone present. Some people come to worship needing comfort and some people come needing challenge; some come searching for intellectual stimulation and others want their hearts to be touched.

No pastor can meet every need on every Sunday. But this task is especially difficult on Mother's Day. Some come to church wanting a warm, inspiring message on the glories of motherhood. Others come hoping the pastor will ignore the holiday because it's too painful.

I'm guessing there is at least one mother here or on line this morning who has already had a long day. She was up at 2:10, and 4:15, and 5:45 this morning, and she's already done a load of laundry, refereed two fights between her children, dug through the dirty laundry for something clean enough for her to wear – because the load she washed wasn't for her – and planned her own Mother's Day lunch. (Oh, and she already sent cards and gifts to her mother AND mother-in-law.) This mother is sitting here thinking, "If I hear one word about how wonderful motherhood is, I'm gonna scream!" And in the next pew there is someone thinking longingly, "I'd take it all."

Others in the pews would rather not be reminded of their own mothers. Their mothers were not paragons of virtue, did not embody unconditional love and compassion, or didn't have a maternal instinct in their entire bodies. The offspring of these women are sitting here thinking, "If I hear one word about how wonderful everybody else's mother was, I'm gonna scream."

And in the next pew there is someone who chose not to be a mother, and who is hoping nobody will imply that she's less of a woman because of that choice. And next to her is a woman who chose to end her pregnancy and gets nervous every year for fear that she will be demonized for her choice.

Then there are those mothers who have difficult relationships with their children, or whose children are in trouble, and they secretly wonder if it's their fault. And, of course, there are those who lost their mothers too soon, and my simply naming that loss is painful for them because they miss their moms so much.

Then there's the fact that lots of churches, in their efforts to honor mothers, caused unintended pain to others.

You see why it's hard to preach on Mother's day? It's much easier and safer to just go with the lectionary. Preachers calling on other preachers to not preach about motherhood on Mother's Day were all over Facebook and different blogs this week.

But there is a flip side, a different way of looking at the issue. One of my friends said, “I understand all the problems, but I like to meet people where they are – and where they are today is Mother’s Day.” Or to put it even more eloquently, another colleague wrote, “I understand that many churches handle Mother’s Day poorly. But part of worship is bringing our whole, broken lives into God’s presence together. If we cannot acknowledge this part of life – with a great deal of sensitivity and care – what other parts should be cut out, too?”

Well, I’m sticking with the lectionary on this Mother’s Day but I’m also talking about the origin of Mother’s Day and it has nothing to do with flowers.

Julia Ward Howe was an important American author and poet during the mid-1800s. She was also a social activist who struggled to abolish slavery and who worked for a woman’s right to vote. She met Abraham Lincoln in 1861 at the beginning of the Civil War. After meeting him, she was inspired to write *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*. The song instantly became a hit among Union soldiers during the war and its influence in patriotism and war continues today.

Howe hoped that these words would inspire Union soldiers to defeat the Confederacy. The words unite God and war.

But what we don’t know about Julia Ward Howe and her *Battle Hymn of the Republic* is that she had a change of heart. She watched the devastation of the Civil War with horror. She saw young men on both sides blown apart. Or, if they were lucky, they survived but were maimed for the rest of their lives.

At the beginning of the Civil War, Howe wrote that her eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord. But, as the gruesome war continued, her eyes were opened to seeing the horrors of the coming of the war.

After her eyes saw the horror of war, she became a radical pacifist and fought for an end to all war. And he did so by calling for a national day dedicated to mothers. Julia Ward Howe wanted Mother’s Day to be a reminder of the daily struggle to end all war.

A few years after the Civil War and its brutal carnage on both sides sank in, Howe wrote what we know today as her “Mother’s Day Proclamation.” This time, she invoked the name of God in a way that was fundamentally different from the *Battle Hymn of the Republic*. Instead of a battle, she now called for peace. She called for women around the world to unite in refusing to allow their children to fight one another. She argued that women held great power and hoped that the power of mothers would inspire the world.

Instead of writing about God’s “terrible swift sword” she wrote, “Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn all that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy and patience. We, the women of one country, will be too tender of those of another country to allow our songs to be trained to injure theirs. From the bosom of the devastated Earth a voice goes up with our own. It says, “Disarm! Disarm!”

She also hoped that mothers could unite so that, as she wrote, “The great human family could live in peace, man as the brother of man, each bearing after his own kind the sacred impress, not of Caesar, but of God.

Along came Methodist Anna Jarvis who created a group called “Mother’s Day Work Clubs” in West Virginia. During the war, the Union Army requested that these work clubs act as nurses to wounded Union Army soldiers. Anna added that the women of the Mother’s Day Work Club

would care for any soldier in need, whether from the North or the South. Anna Jarvis thought that God's love extended to all of God's children and so should theirs.

I tell you this story because Mother's Day isn't just about Hallmark Cards. It has a subversive political history of non-violence and it is rooted in the Gospel of Jesus.

As we look at our scripture lesson for this morning, it's a continuation of Jesus saying good bye to his disciples. If you remember, last Sunday, he was saying to them, "Don't let your hearts be troubled., and guess what? You're going to do greater things than I ever did!"

And today, Jesus is saying to them and to us, God is going to send the Holy Spirit and this Spirit will be the Spirit of truth. The Spirit will live in you. Now you may have seen a word in the scripture reading that is a new one for you. Paraclete. I wanted to talk about that word for a moment. Literally, the Greek word Parakletos means "someone who is called to come alongside someone else. In Greek culture, a paraclete was like a family attorney.

So a paraclete was someone who came alongside people and defended them, who protected them in times of trouble. He was someone who came alongside the weak to give them strength and courage, especially in the context of being persecuted. This is what some older translations are getting at when they translate paraclete as "comforter."

That is the what the Paraclete is. The one who is alongside of us. The One who bears our burdens and defends us. The One who gives us strength and courage.

So Jesus knows he will be leaving them, but he's not leaving them alone. He's sending his Spirit, the paraclete to give us that holy boldness to continue the work that needs to be done. Greater works than Jesus has ever done. But we won't be walking alone.

As we look at the world around us, it can become overwhelming. I am afraid to look at twitter because when I do, there's been another mass shooting. Just last Saturday May 6th mass shooting at an outdoor mall in Allen, Texas, that left 8 victims dead and 7 more people injured, is the 199th mass shooting of 2023, according to the Gun Violence Archive.

The Gun Violence Archive which is an independent research and data collection organization, defines a mass shooting as an event where at least four people were shot or injured, outside of the gunman. More than 14,500 people have also died from gun violence this year alone.

Julia Ward Howe and Anna Jarvis were women, mother's who saw what was happening to their children and said no more. We are going to speak up and we are going to speak out.

There is another woman I want to tell you about. Her name is Shannon Watts.

Shannon Watts is the founder of Moms Demand Action. After the massacre at Sandy Hook elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut that killed 26 people, including 20 children aged six and seven, Shannon Watts said she went to bed devastated. She was in tears but also full of rage and overwhelmed by this feeling of needing to do something.

The next morning she went to work. Scouring the internet, she found a few anti-gun violence groups, but all were headed by men. That wasn't for her. She said "I wanted to be part of a badass army of women." So she set out to create one.

From humble beginnings as a small Facebook group, Moms Demand Action has grown into a powerful organization with chapters in all 50 states and claims some 10 million supporters.

Watts claims the group has scored 500 legislative victories on the local or national level, nearly always in opposition to the country's powerful pro-gun lobby, the National Rifle Association.

From her earliest days of activism she has been marked with threats. Heavily armed men have been expelled from events where she appeared. She travels with "someone who specializes in security," whose responsibilities include always knowing the location of "the nearest hospital to take me to if there's a shooting."

But Watts insisted she will not be silenced. "If we lose our children," she said, "We have nothing left to lose."

Brian Bilston wrote a powerful poem I want to share: It's entitled "America is a Gun."

England is a cup of tea
France, a wheel of ripened brie.
Greece, a short, squat olive tree.
America is a gun.

Brazil is football on the sand.
Argentina, Maradona's hand
Germany, an oompah band.
America is a gun.

Holland is a wooden shoe.
Hungary, a Goulash stew.
Australia, a kangaroo.
America is a gun.

Japan is a thermal spring
Scotland is a highland fling.
Oh, better to be anything
than America as a gun.

This mother's day, I want us to remember the origin of this holiday. Yes, it will be nice to get flowers and be taken to brunch and get gifts and spend time with family. But Jesus left us with the Holy Spirit to do greater things than he ever could. What greater calling than to protect our children, so they can go to school, to a mall, to a movie theatre, to church, to synagogue, to a mosque, pulling in the wrong drive way, ringing the door bell, or playing hide and seek and know they are safe.

Happy Mother's Day. And in the words of the original Mother's Day Proclamation, "Disarm! Disarm!" Amen.