

Mothers, Peace and Unity

I confess to having mixed emotions about Mother's Day. This was not always so. I celebrated my mother with great joy as a child and even through my difficult teen years (can you imagine that I was a difficult teen?). I adored my mother – she and I were constant companions for the first seven and a half years of my life – and for her, I was the baby she finally got to keep after losing two in infancy in the space of thirteen months. But we buried Mom about a week shy of Mother's Day in 1978, less than a month before my high school graduation, and it's never been the same for me since. I try not to be like Aesop's dog in the manger when it comes to Mother's Day – preventing the enjoyment of others over something that I can't digest – which is why I instituted the old southern tradition of carnations for the womenfolk on Mother's Day at Good Shepherd Baptist. I think mothers and all women should be celebrated on this day. Women, whether you have raised a child of your own or not, for millennia your gender has been the civilizing influence on our species, more often than not. All of us have a birth mother and all of us have benefitted from the teaching, nurturing and love of women, be they adoptive mothers, aunts, sisters, grandmas, teachers or friends. Around the country today, men who rarely darken the door of the church come to worship services to please the women in their lives – did you know that Mother's Day is high attendance Sunday at most churches behind only Easter and Christmas Eve? – and that is right and proper.

But I know that I am not the only one to view today with at least a little bit of a shadow. Some of my friends have been sharing a sermon posted on a blog this week from Julie Long. She notes that Mother's Day “can be a really hard day. Mother's Day conjures up painful memories for those who have lost their mothers, or for those whose relationship with their mother is not all that it could be. Mother's Day is a day of grief for those who have desperately wanted a child and could not have one and those who have deeply loved a child that they have lost. For some, the ideals of motherhood have been shattered by disappointment and stress. And those who never became mothers, either by choice or for other reasons, are often made to feel like second class citizens on this day. For a lot of people, Mother's Day is hard!”

Even the originator of our modern Mother's Day holiday became aware during the course of her life of the pitfalls of the observance she'd worked so hard to make a national day of honor for mothers. Anna Reeves Jarvis of Grafton, West Virginia, organized the first Mother's Day celebration in 1908 and the movement took off after she enlisted the help of John Wanamaker in 1910. Wanamaker was a well-to-do Philadelphia merchant, widely known today as “the father of modern marketing.” Although the observance he organized took place in his church on Sunday, it's unlikely that his motives were entirely spiritual. Indeed, the holiday so quickly became a retailer's bonanza that Ms. Jarvis herself complained of the commercialism, disavowed the holiday as it had changed, and was even arrested for disturbing the peace when she marched in a protest of the day. Before she died, she said that she wished she would have “never started the holiday because it became so out of control.” Not a particularly auspicious history.

Perhaps, we'd do better to take our Mother's Day cue from an earlier attempt to create a holiday honoring mothers. Julia Ward Howe is best known as the writer of the stirring lyrics known as “the Battle Hymn of the Republic.” A prominent abolitionist, pacifist, suffragette and poet, Ms. Ward Howe was the first American woman elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters, a distinction she achieved in 1908 at age 88. Although some find her most famous work to be a bit bellicose, her deep feelings of repugnance over the bloody conduct of the Civil War in

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this country and the Franco-Prussian War shortly afterwards in Europe inspired her to appeal for women to unite for peace throughout the world. A proto-feminist, Howe was convinced that women had a responsibility to shape their societies at the political level. In 1870, she wrote a "Mother's Day Proclamation," and later led an unsuccessful campaign for the day to be observed nationwide.

Here is Julia Ward Howe's appeal to women around the world to work for peace:

"Arise, then, women of this day!

Arise, all women who have hearts, Whether our baptism be of water or of tears!

Say firmly: "We will not have great questions decided by irrelevant agencies, Our husbands will not come to us, reeking with carnage, for caresses and applause. 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 sons to be trained to injure theirs."

From the bosom of the devastated Earth a voice goes up with our own. It says: "Disarm! Disarm! The sword of murder is not the balance of justice." Blood does not wipe out dishonor, nor violence indicate possession. As men have often forsaken the plough and the anvil at the summons of war, Let women now leave all that may be left of home for a great and earnest day of counsel.

Let them meet first, as women, to bewail and commemorate the dead. Let them solemnly take counsel with each other as to the means Whereby the great human family can live in peace, Each bearing after his own time the sacred impress, not of Caesar, But of God.

In the name of womanhood and humanity, I earnestly ask That a general congress of women without limit of nationality May be appointed and held at someplace deemed most convenient And at the earliest period consistent with its objects, To promote the alliance of the different nationalities, The amicable settlement of international questions, The great and general interests of peace."

Despite the failure of Julia Ward Howe's vision for Mother's Day, the call for peace has continued to resonate in at least some small corners of our society. For every war which has taken place around the world, there have been those who have spoken for peace. The ongoing work of building a peaceful world has been taken up by many organizations although none of them have been wholly successful. Many of the current voices for peace are associated with different religious bodies, as one should hope. Our own tradition is represented among these groups by the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America, a joint project of American and Southern Baptists devoted to peacemaking. I have been aware of the BPFNA since its founding in Louisville in 1984, the year I started my seminary career in that city. Some of you know Stephen Jones, who was pastor at Seattle First Baptist Church between Rod Romney and Tim Phillips. Steve was Board President for a few years and the Peace Fellowship published his book, Peaceteacher: Jesus' Way of Shalom. So, I was delighted when our Board of Deacons voted in September to approve Rev. Charlotte Keyes' suggestion that Good Shepherd Baptist become a Partner Congregation in the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America, a process which is still ongoing.

I want you to hear a bit of the Peace Fellowship's Mission and Vision Statement this morning; I think you will hear in them much resonance with our own congregational statements and with

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Julia Ward Howe's original call to mothers as peacemakers. The Mission Statement is: "The Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America gathers, equips and mobilizes Baptists to build a culture of peace rooted in justice. We labour with a wonderful array of peacemakers to change the world." I won't read all of the Fellowship's statements of Calling and Values but here are some portions that stand out for me:

"We are called by God to the Gospel of Peace. This calling is rooted in our faith in Jesus Christ, who is our Peace, in whom God is reconciling the world and through whom God calls us to the ministry of peacemaking. Peace is not only our goal but also our means. The foundation of peace is justice. The force of peace is love.

God through Christ is calling us to build a culture of justice and peace and to active peacemaking in situations of conflict. Our roots in the Hebrew faith have given us the concept of Shalom, the wholeness of God's peace. Our Muslim friends share a similar understanding of peace in the idea of Salaam."

"We value our roots in Baptist faith and tradition. We treasure and uphold the strong but largely forgotten heritage of Baptist peacemakers. When these roots are reclaimed, we experience an outpouring of the spirit in the beloved community.

We are committed to networking with others who share similar faith commitments and a call to work for justice and peace. In collaborating with those from different faith traditions, we are committed to openness and mutual respect.

Our work is Gospel-based. We are committed to learning for ourselves and helping others understand what it means to follow Jesus.

We are committed to nurturing a culture of peace rooted in justice among ourselves, in Baptist churches and institutions, and in the world around us.

We nourish a spirit of compassion. We act for peace with justice out of a heart space, led by the Spirit of Christ. That Spirit has always sought the best for persons and peoples, even those who do not know the meaning of the word compassion. We confess that compassion is a difficult but vital value to uphold...

We value grace and seek to embody God's grace in the world. We strive to be consistently compassionate toward our enemies and perceived enemies, welcoming, forgiving, and reconciling toward both public and personal enemies."

Inserted into your bulletins this morning is a simple Baptist Peace Fellowship publication, "The Bible Speaks About Peace: 12 Things Every Christian Should Know." I encourage you to read it and to explore the Bible passages it cites. If you'd like to learn more about the Peace Fellowship, they have a good website, the address of which is at the bottom of the flier. You may also be interested in individual membership. Charlotte and I have been members as was Tracy Gipson, Carol Calkins' late father. You may also be interested in the annual Baptist Peace Camp organized by the Peace Fellowship. We have a rare opportunity to participate this year as the camp will be held at Gonzaga University in Spokane from July 15-20. The theme this year is "Entertaining Angels: Peacemaking through Radical Hospitality," and speakers will include our Evergreen Association Executive Minister, Rev. Dr. Marcia Patton, the current pastor of our "mother church," University Baptist, Rev. Manny Santiago, and Dr. Miguel De La Torre, whose

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filmed remarks some of you enjoyed in our Wednesday night study of immigration issues. Registration materials are available in the Narthex and financial aid is available.

Another program of the Peace Fellowship is the promotion of Peace Sunday on Mother's Day each year, restoring the purpose of the day as Julia Ward Howe originally envisioned it and moving to correct the commercial excesses of John Wanamaker and his spiritual heirs from the day they co-opted from Anna Jarvis. We are using some of the resources provided by the BPFNA in our own celebrations this morning in our songs and prayers and I hope you will continue to welcome this addition to our Mother's Day traditions in years to come.

I've used most of my time this morning to talk about Mother's Day and the Peace Fellowship but I think the connection to our Gospel for the morning is a simple one which will not require much explication. As I read this small section of John's rendering of Jesus' prayer for his disciples, a part of the great Farewell Discourse about which I spoke last week, I hear in this prayer for unity the deeper truth of both peace and motherhood. I hear in these words the love which God, our Heavenly Father and Mother, has for us, the love expressed through the life and work of Jesus, the Anointed One, the love through which we are bound to God and to each other in the work of the Holy Spirit, the Comforter. I hear in these words the aspirations of every mother, every nurturing woman, for her children – that they experience love, that they live in peace, that they find favor with God and with each other.

In fairness, I should probably note that if the author of this Fourth Gospel was indeed John, the son of Zebedee, he might be astonished to hear such high ideals attributed to mothers. His own mother, according to the evidence of another Gospel, was a lulu. The pattern for every pushy mom, it was the mother of the Zebedee brothers, according to Matthew, who came to Jesus with the request that the two of them sit at his right and left hand in the kingdom. Maybe when they were called "the sons of thunder," it was their mother that people were thinking of. Having experienced more than a few of these "thunder moms" in my previous profession, "stage mothers" being the more familiar term, I can assure you that they are just as noisy and no more welcome than thunder around the Sea of Galilee is to fishermen. But I digress...

Insofar as the unity for which Jesus prayed is concerned, I think we can all agree that this unity does not mean uniformity. Every mother knows that each of her children is different. All of us know that our friends, the people for whom we care, are not uniform in their opinions, their likes and their dislikes. It is the same for the children of God. We are physically different – that is a part of God's wondrous plan. We are short and tall, with blue eyes or brown or green or hazel. We have different skin tones, different features, different hair. We are moved to love different people, we taste food in different ways. And we understand God differently, see the world differently. This, too, seems to me to be a part of God's wonderful plan. We are called to be one in love not in spite of these differences but because of them so that we can learn from each other truths about the world and about God that we could never discover on our own. Unity in Christ does not mean uniformity. We're one but we're not the same.

The unity Jesus prayed that we would experience is not just unity with each other but unity with God. And if Jesus prayed for us to experience unity with God, then surely the possibility exists. We can have the same relationship with God that Jesus enjoyed. We can let the Spirit dwelling

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within us transform our lives so that our ears are attuned to God's voice, so that our eyes are guided to what God wants us to see, and so that those around us see the glory of God through our actions.

This unity for which Jesus prayed is another way of expressing peace, another way of saying shalom. This is true because it is unity through love – God's love in us becoming our love for each other. This peace, this love so resonant with the love mothers have for their children, is beautifully expressed for my generation in the words of my favorite contemporary Christian poet, Paul Hewson, better known as Bono, lead singer of the group U2. On their 1991 album, *Achtung Baby*, Bono sang these words:

One love
One blood
One life
You got to do what you should
One life
With each other
Sisters
Brothers
One life
But we're not the same
We get to
Carry each other
Carry each other
One
One

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, One God and Mother of us all,
Amen.