

Mother of Peace

Happy Mother's Day, again, and again, thank you, to the young people in our congregation who've done such an outstanding job of making this day special for all of us. I'm especially appreciative because, as many of you know, Mother's Day can be kind of tough for me. That started 40 years ago when Mother's Day came hard on the heels of the death of my own mom, when she was just 40 and I was 17. In the intervening years, I've enjoyed seeing Connie be fêted by our children, sent warm greetings to my mother-in-law and other outstanding women who've acted as surrogate moms to me, and appreciated the many gifts of mothers and other women, including all in this congregation, on the annual celebration of moms and all those who nurture. But I confess it's always seemed just a little lacking. As I began a few weeks ago to prepare for today, I wondered if it would have made a difference to 17 year old me and over the years if I'd had a sounder concept of the way in which God is not just Father to us all but Mother as well?

I hope it doesn't shock anyone here too much to hear me refer to God as Mother. There is a goodly amount of imagery in the Bible, after all, that describes our Loving Creator in maternal terms. In the Christian tradition I grew up in, and I suspect this is true for many of us, an exclusively male clergy didn't do a fabulous job of calling these passages to our attention and teaching us what their impact on our outlook should be. I'm not suggesting that any of those preachers were misogynists, you understand; it's more likely that they'd never been pushed to think about it themselves. But I don't want anyone here this morning, and especially our young people, to be able to say about me in ten or twenty years that they'd never heard the importance of feminine imagery for God from this pulpit.

That maternal imagery shows up in our Bibles right away, on page one, if you will. A translation of Genesis 1:2 that has stuck in my mind for as long as I can remember says, "The Spirit of God brooded over the face of the waters." That's not the standard translation in the King James Version or the NRSV or NIV or any other popular English translation, so I don't know where I learned it but that picture of the Holy Spirit as a brooding mother bird grabbed ahold of me and would not let go. I cannot think of God's act of creation without thinking of the universe being nestled in the warm, soft presence of God Godself like an egg waiting to hatch. The love and care that summons for me takes my breath away and reminds me how dearly God loves all of us and all of God's creation.

The maternal language is even more overt when it comes to God's description of creation in the Book of Job. You may remember that after 35 chapters of Job's complaint against God and his friends arguing with him, God answers Job "out of the whirlwind:" "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me. Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding." As part of God's schooling of Job, God asks, "From whose womb did the ice come forth, and who has given birth to the hoarfrost of heaven?" The implicit answer, of course, is that creation came from the womb of God. It was God who gave birth to, not only all things now living but all that is and was and is to be. God is not only our Father, God is our Mother.

The prophet Isaiah, in the four verses I read a moment ago as well as in some other passages, uses maternal imagery for God to help in his calling from God to comfort God's people. In chapter 42, verse 14, God is heard comparing Godself to a woman in labor, intimately involved

Mother of Peace

in bringing a better world to birth. In chapter 46, God describes Godself to the remnant of Israel as the One who carried them in the womb and will carry them until the end, saving them from their enemies. And in the book's final chapter, God promises to continue to act as a mother to Israel, comforting them as a dear child. In a passage from Isaiah which I did not read before and which is echoed in the book of Hosea, God reassures Israel that God is both their birth mother and their nurse: "Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you." Hosea also shows God in a different maternal mode — that of mama bear: "I will fall upon them like a bear robbed of her cubs." The prophets of patriarchal Israel understood that God was also like a mother to God's people.

And for all that we attribute our habit of calling God "Father" to Jesus, we should remember that he, too, described himself caring for God's people as a mother would. Not long before his death, Jesus weeps over the city of Jerusalem in a scene reported in both the Gospel According to Matthew and Luke: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" What a tender image that is! Jesus also compares God to a careful woman, undoubtedly a mother. "Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." Only a mother can make such a fuss over one child come home.

These images of God as Mother should strike us no more strangely than images of God as Father because, after all, "God created humankind in God's image, in the image of God God created them; male and female God created them." If there were no other reason to honor women that they are created in the image of God would be sufficient. But throughout the Bible, if we don't ignore them, there are women held up for us as heroines of our faith, exemplars of how to trust in God. There are women who stand up for justice for themselves when men fail them, like Tamar. There are women who commit to standing with the people of God even in danger to themselves like Rahab and Ruth. All three of those, by the way, are listed in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus. We can read in our Bibles stories of wise women rulers like Deborah and clever subversives who saved God's people like Shiprah and Puah and Esther. We also remember the women who blessed God's people by being mothers: Sarah and Hagar and Rebbekah and Rachel and Leah and Hannah and Elizabeth and Mary.

Mary made enough impact on her son that Jesus included women in his inner circle. Martha and Mary of Bethany were his dear friends. Mary Magdalene was the first to see the resurrected Christ and to tell the Good News. There were others, too, who supported his mission with food and money. And although the Church has largely abandoned their stories, we catch tantalizing glimpses in Paul's letters of women who were leaders in the churches that he founded and visited: Phoebe, the deacon; Junia, the apostle; Priscilla, who with her husband Aquila taught the great preacher Apollos; Eudoia and Syntyche of Philippi; and many, many more. In Acts, Luke tells us that the first church in Europe, that in Philippi, met in the home of Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth, one of the great luxury goods of the time.

Mother of Peace

If it has gotten lost in this blizzard of names, let me make sure my point is clear. The celebration of Mother's Day, however secular its origins may have been, belongs in the church as part of our yearly liturgy because of the way that women have built the inbreaking Kingdom of God and because God Godself is the ultimate model for mothers and for all positive attributes which we are accustomed to ascribing to women. And although Mother's Day was not initiated by a church body, the origins of the day in the United States have a great deal to do with yet another virtue that we identify with God – Peace.

It's a complicated story but Mother's Day as we observe it now had roots in three peace-related activities. First was the work of Ann Reeves Jarvis in what is now West Virginia in the years prior to the Civil War. She organized "Mothers' Day Work Clubs" to teach good child care habits and these later became centers of reconciliation following the war. Jarvis then organized "Mothers' Friendship Day" in 1868 at which mothers gathered with former Union and Confederate soldiers to further promote reconciliation.

Two years later, in 1870, Julia Ward Howe, best known for her lyrics to "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," wrote a "Mother's Day Proclamation" calling on women to gather in the cause of peace. In 1873, she campaigned for a "Mother's Peace Day" to be celebrated on June 1. If you've not heard Howe's proclamation lately, it's worth revisiting:

"Arise, all women who have hearts, whether your baptism be that of water or of tears! Say firmly: "We will not have great questions decided by irrelevant agencies, our husbands shall 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 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 is not the balance of justice." Blood does not wipe out dishonor nor violence indicate possession.

As men have often forsaken the plow 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 then solemnly take counsel with each other as to the means whereby the great human family can live in peace, each learning after his own time, the sacred impress, not of Caesar, but of God.

In the name of womanhood and of humanity, I earnestly ask that a general congress of women without limit of nationality may be appointed and held at some place 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."

Mother of Peace

Sadly, Howe's movement did not last but in 1905, after the death of Ann Reeves Jarvis, her daughter, Anna Jarvis began to plan for a day to honor her mother and her work for peace. In a move she later regretted, she accepted financial backing from Wanamaker's department store in Philadelphia. The first "Mother's Day" celebration was held in a Methodist church in 1908 as well as at Wanamaker's and by 1914 President Woodrow Wilson signed a proclamation declaring the second Sunday in May to be Mother's Day nationwide. It should be noted that Anna Jarvis became appalled at the commercialization of the day and ultimately started an unsuccessful campaign to have people refrain from buying flowers and gifts. I suspect that the mothers and nurturing women of this congregation and all others would gladly swap all the flowers, brunches, and small gifts they've ever received for Mother's Day for God's shalom to sweep our world.

Now, in my emphasis this morning on feminine attributes of God and Mother's Day, I don't want the fellas to feel left out. There are a number of messages for us, here, men. I'm sure I don't have to remind any man here to honor his mother and the other women in his life, for they, too, were created in God's image. Also, we can and should celebrate in other men and in our selves the attributes of God which appear in our lives whether they are considered traditionally masculine or traditionally feminine. If our God is a nurturer, a comforter, a carrier of our burdens, then can we not aim to be likewise? Men, it's OK, in fact it's encouraged for us to be motherly.

Certainly, we are called to be peacemakers like God, like Ann Reeves Jarvis, like Julia Ward Howe. Yesterday, I attended a training in Nonviolent Moral Fusion Direct Action as practiced by the Poor People's Campaign – A National Call for Moral Revival. At the end of the training, we were all called upon to sign the Campaign's Covenant of Nonviolence. It was a two-page, closely set document, so I won't read it all for you, but I want you to hear a little bit of what that mixed crowd of men and women agreed to adhere to in the name of peace. The first pledge is, "I will embrace and uphold my responsibility as a member of the human race to honor and respect the inherent worth and dignity of every human being. Recognizing that the sanctity of life flows in each and every one of us, I will act with respect towards all." Another paragraph includes these words: "It is imperative to the strength and success of the Poor People's Campaign that we maintain nonviolent unity, discipline, and rigor — tapping into a power and soulforce that exists within each of us. Accordingly, and at all times, I will be firmly grounded in nonviolence as a philosophy, practice, and discipline and will strive to embody values of courage, inclusion, pursuit of justice, and love for all humanity." I was proud to sign that document and I'll bet you all would have been, too. Jesus calls us all to be peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.

I think we'd all agree, too, that we are all called to be compassionate, to love our neighbor as we love our selves, to love even our enemies. In the old King James Version, the word in the Old Testament we now translate as "compassion" was often translated "bowels," which young children, myself included, have often found hilarious. But in fact, that Hebrew word, which in its plural means compassion or love or mercy, in its singular form means uterus. When we read of God's compassion or the compassion that we are to have for others, we are literally being told to treat them as if we'd carried them in our wombs. Gentlemen, our lack of the named organ

Mother of Peace

does not remove the charge on us to be compassionate. It might just mean we have to work a little harder than the ladies to accomplish it.

And so, again, I say, “Happy Mother’s Day.” Happy Peace Sunday. As we go from this place to honor and celebrate the women in our families, let us remember that God, too, is our Mother, the One who gave us life, the One who nurtures us, comforts us, and protects us. And let us remember that we, too, male and female, are created in the image of God in order that we may, to the best of our abilities, continue the work of God in tending and loving all of creation. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, one God and Mother of us all, Amen.