

mothers' Day

Psalms 67

Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5

John 14:23-29

Acts 16:9-15

If you read the title in the bulletin, you may have noticed that the 'm' in the first word of the title is not capitalized, and it is plural, not singular. Those are not typos. I wrote it that way on purpose, because this day was initially not intended to be a day where we focus only on our own mothers and have cake presents and fine meals. It was a day brought forth by three women as the result of the Civil War.

The first woman was Ann Marie Reeves Jarvis. She was from Appalachia who started in 1858 organizing the mothers in the area to help improve sanitation; it was called "Mother's Friendship Day". By 1868 she was working toward reconciling Union and Confederate mothers by organizing and teaching women basic nursing skills and sanitation.

The second woman was Julia Ward Howe. (Does anyone here know who she is?) She wrote the poem that we sing called, "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." Mrs. Howe was influenced by the work that Ann Jarvis was doing, and Mrs. Howe has been given much credit for promoting the idea of proclaiming a mothers' Day. She proposed an annual Mothers' Day for Peace in 1872 in Boston.

The third woman was Anna Jarvis, Ann Marie Reeves Jarvis' daughter. After the death of her mother in 1905, Anna became motivated to create a day, inspired by her mother's work, in order to "honor mothers, living and dead." By May 10, 1908, she had accomplished her goal and that was the first celebrate Mother's Day.

These women saw the power that mothers could have in bringing about changes for good, in their environment and in the world. Stephanie Coontz wrote, "The 19th century forerunners of our modern holiday were called mothers' days, not Mother's Day. The plural is significant: They celebrated the extension of women's moral concerns beyond the home. They commemorated mothers' civic roles and services to the nation, not their private roles and personal services to the family. The women who organized the first mothers' days believed motherhood was a political force that should be mobilized on behalf of the entire community, not merely an expression of a fundamental instinct that led them to lavish all their time and attention on their children."

Now, Mother's Day is a very problematic day in the church. Not everyone has such a positive feeling about their mothers. Some feel embarrassed and pain because their relationship with their children is not as they would wish it to be. Some women would have wished to be mothers but it did not happen, yet for some, and for some they know it will never be. For some LGBT people this day is particularly painful, reminding them of their parent's rejection.

And this isn't even mentioning the fact that Mother's Day is a secular Holiday - not a church Holiday and the debate around whether or not we should even mention Mother's Day in the church, let alone preach on it. For example, I'm at the top of page three in my sermon and I haven't even mentioned the scriptures once! Where's the biblical exegesis and profound teachings about Jesus so far?

All three of these women were well informed, educated, Christian women. All three had friends who were pastors and felt inspired by their faith, and a bloody war, which threatened to tear apart the societies around them - their social families - to call women together to bring peace.

In 1870 Julia Ward Howe wrote another, not so famous prose as a reaction to the American Civil War and the Franco-Prussian War. It is called "Mothers' Day Proclamation":

Arise then...women of this day!

Arise, all women who have hearts!

Whether your baptism be of water or of tears!

Say firmly:

"We will not have questions answered 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 a 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 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.

These are words that I hope inspire all people in contemporary society. That a desire for lasting peace is no longer just a fancy of the idle women whose hearts were too weak to face the carnage, anger, pain and loss they witnessed around them. These are words for the feminine part of all humanity – male or female. This is the last year for the World Council of Church's "Decade to Overcome Violence". It was a program I worked with in Germany for most of the ten years of this program. And I do believe whole heartedly in it, because there are those in this world who have witnessed that change can occur through non-violent means. It takes longer than using violent force, but it is a healthier and long lasting change. Peace is possible.

We need to have more and more of humanity who believe in the possibilities of peace through changing the essence of the human being, starting with ourselves. We have a Lord, who focused his life on teaching love, not destruction. He whipped those money changers in the temple – he showed us that there are things that are to be treasured and protected – that we can use our anger as a force for change – but he never used all the power that he had in him, through God, to cause damage. He even restored the soldier's ear that Paul had cut off at Gethsemane.

Jesus was willing to show the evil for what it was – to suffer the pain of an immoral and unjust death – which was an act of non-violence – he took an action when we did not resist – he wasn't passive – he was actively involved in every step pointing out the injustices – just as the Indians who were fighting for self rule from the Brits in India did, as they peacefully walked up, one after the other, to the gate to look in the face of the soldiers as they beat them down.

Jesus' message didn't die with him. He came back so that his followers would know that what he taught – what he lived – was real. And that is the only thing that his Disciples could have been teaching when Lydia was listening to them. It is a shame that we don't have the exact lesson that they were teaching, but if you think about it – Jesus' message, his life, and the proof of his resurrection is all about the power of love – the power of non-violence – the power of the goal of peace – the power that the disciples taught in those days – that Lydia, the mother of Western European Christianity recognized – the power that Julia Ward Howe, Ann Marie Reeves Jarvis, and Anna Jarvis all knew about – the power that the WCC and the Decade to Overcome Violence knew all about.

We can look at violence against Children and their mothers and know that it is wrong. And the originators of this day knew that violence against other people's children is also wrong as well. This day means so much more than the ability to have children of not. It is a day for all of us to allow our hearts to rule our actions and trust that God is love and there is power in that.

So whether you are celebrating capital M and singular Mother's day or small m and plural mothers' Day – we can leave this worship today empowered by Jesus Christ who wept when he witnessed mourning, who healed when he saw pain, who spoke the truth to destructive and unjust power – and who loves us all dearly.

Amen