

A Mother's Love
Rev. Mark Hayes
May 13, 2007

Reading: "Mother's Day" by Rev. Katie Lee Crane

May means Mother's Day. I'm going to trust Hallmark and Daddies and six year-olds and grown-up kids who are mommies themselves to honor the mothers among us as they deserve to be honored – with brass bands, flags flying, breakfast in bed (*and* kitchens cleaned up afterwards). I wish for those mothers a memorable day full of love and laughter.

Sadly, I don't trust Hallmark to remember the feelings of the women who don't fit Mother's Day in quite the same wonderful way. There are no cards on the rack for the women who gave up children for adoption never to see them again. No cards for the women who faced the painful and difficult choice to end a pregnancy. No cards for women who desperately want to conceive and bear children and cannot. No cards for women who have lost children of any age or for the women whose children have abandoned them in anger. There is little consolation for them on a day so full of "motherhood and apple pie."

I always feel a little awkward on Mother's Day. I suspect there are those among you who do too. For one thing I have two mothers to remember: my adoptive mother (the one I knew and lost) and my birth mother (the one I lost and never knew). For another, there is no special day for women like me, women who love children and who chose, carefully and conscientiously, not to have them. Even now that I have step children in my life, it's not *my* day. There are no cards on the rack to honor the special "grown-up friends" that women like me try to be to our nieces and nephews, to our friends' children, to the children and youth in our neighborhoods, our churches, our schools. It's not that we want a medal for doing something we love, it's just awkward. Sometimes not having children *is* a source of grief; sometimes it's a choice.

Every year when Mother's Day rolls around I wish there were just a little less hype about *traditional* motherhood, a little more acknowledgement of not-so-traditional "mothers" in our midst – people who come in both genders and in all colors, shapes, sizes, and ages. And more than anything, I wish there were a lot more empathy for those who suffer because Mothers are being honored and they don't fit in in quite the same wonderful way.

Let us honor them all on this day. Women who conceived. Women who bore. Women who reared. Women who lost. Women who let go. Women who made different choices. And men who mother. Happy day. May each of you know your worth to all of us.

Sermon:

I begin with a story from a realtor friend of mine. He included it in his most recent monthly newsletter:

The day before Mother's Day, a woman stopped at a flower shop to order some flowers to be sent to her mother who lived 200 miles away.

As she got out of her car she noticed a young girl sitting on the curb sobbing. She asked her what was wrong and the girl replied, "I wanted to buy a red rose for my mother. But I only have seventy-five cents, and a rose costs two dollars." The woman smiled and said, "Come on in with me."

I'll buy you a rose." She bought the little girl her rose and ordered her own mother's flowers.

As they were leaving, she offered the girl a ride. "Yes, please!" she said. "You can take me to my mother." She directed the woman to a nearby cemetery, where the young girl placed the rose on a freshly dug grave.

The woman returned to the flower shop, canceled her order, bought an armload of flowers, and drove the two hundred miles to her mother's house.

Now, that is a moving story, and it does include some important lessons about not taking things for granted, and about the importance of expressing our love and appreciation while we still can. But, in light of this morning's reading, it is somehow incomplete – insufficiently inclusive – as a summary of what Mother's Day is about.

As important as it may be to recognize and honor our mothers – those women who brought us into this world – it is equally important to recognize and acknowledge the broader scope of human experience, which does not always fit into the neat packages found in greeting cards or even touching stories.

There is an emotional and spiritual danger in simply lifting up the ideal – the norm – and assuming that everyone's life fits it. To be realistic, to be honest, to be compassionate, we must lift up and honor everyone's experience, as atypical, or as painful, or as joyous as it may be.

As compared with the Mother's Day celebrations of my childhood memory, we must take a more complex, nuanced approach. This morning I'd like to address several ways that I think our recognition of Mother's Day can be made more inclusive and comprehensive.

First, it occurs to me that we need to be a bit careful about what we lift up and honor. The tradition in the church of my childhood was to present the gift of a potted plant to several mothers who represented the superlative in a number of categories. One plant went to the oldest mother present. Another went to the youngest mother present. And yet another went to the mother with the most children. I have no problem with honoring longevity. But in today's world, I'd be a little bit uncomfortable sending the message that "the larger the family the better," or "the younger the mother the better." A young, unmarried teenager with an unplanned infant - not to mention her parents - might not consider it an honor to be singled out in that way.

Next, I think it is important to be intentional about including "non-traditional" family situations. In fact, the traditional norm of a mother and a father and their biological offspring becomes less and less typical. There are single-parent families resulting from either divorce, widowhood, or from never having been married. There are families with same-gender parents. There are blended families including stepchildren. There are adoptive families, in which the birth mother may or may not be in the picture physically, but is certainly there emotionally. My point here is that if we are to recognize and honor certain family relationships – for example, motherhood – we must be careful not to exclude those who don't necessarily fit the fairy-tale version we carry in our mind's eye.

And speaking of fairy-tales, we must also acknowledge that our relationships with our mothers aren't always all sweetness and light. When we pretend that they are, or that they should be, there is another big group of people excluded from our shared celebration. As in any human relationship, that between a mother and a child is full of challenges. Some mothers, and some children, may fall short in their attempts to know, understand, honor, and love one another. It may be a temporary bump in the path that you get beyond, or it may be longer-term, weighing

on you for years or even decades. If we're going to face life honestly, this, too, must be acknowledged.

As one way of recognizing and addressing the complexity of our relationships with, and our memories of our mothers, I'd like to lead you through a "Mother meditation" that appears in the book *Maps to Ecstasy* by Gabrielle Roth:

[Please get comfortable. Close your eyes if you wish.] Imagine your mother sitting across from you. Bring her into focus, get a feeling for her overall being – who she is, how she operates with people, in the world. What does this mother "gestalt" say to you? What emotions are evoked? Think of three things you love about your mother. Three things you hate. Three hopes for her. Three fears. Explore how all these qualities and dynamics are also parts of you, parts that you may refuse to acknowledge and "own."

Imagine some form of physical contact with your mother. Rocking her in your arms, massaging her feet, placing the palm of your hand on her belly. Find a way to effectively imagine and feel this intimate connection.

Now let your mother go, placing her opposite you in your imagination. Look into her eyes, and search deep within yourself to find the power and the courage to thank her and to forgive her absolutely. Thank her for creating your body, for nursing and clothing and caring for it. Forgive her wholeheartedly for her failings, her weaknesses, her shortcomings, her mistakes, and tell her how you, of all people, truly understand the challenges she faced. Thank her for your strengths and infirmities, your blessings and curses, your achievements and wounds, acknowledging that – like a tree or an animal – you are perfect just as you are with all your imperfections and that she is the source of your being.

I invite you to open your eyes and return to this place and time. And I invite you now to think beyond the particular relationship with your actual mother, whether that be your biological, adoptive, or stepmother. I think it is also important to recognize that those roles traditionally attributed to mothers – loving, feeding, nurturing – are sometimes filled by other people in our lives. Indeed, if our mother has been absent for one reason or another, we must find some substitute if we are not to wither from lack of care and attention. Such vicarious mothering – whether in place of, or in addition to our own mother – may come from many different sources. One poignant example may be found in the following story by Naomi Rhode, which appears in the book *Chicken Soup for the Soul at Work*:

He was admitted to emergency receiving and placed on the cardiac floor. Long hair, unshaven, dirty, dangerously obese, with a black motorcycle jacket tossed on the bottom shelf of the stretcher, he was an outsider to this sterile world of shining terrazzo floors, efficient uniformed professionals, and strict infection control procedures. Definitely an untouchable.

The nurses at the station looked wide-eyed as this mound of humanity was wheeled by, each glancing nervously at Bonnie, the head nurse. "Let

this one not be mine to admit, bathe and tend to . . .” was their pleading, unspoken message.

One of the true marks of a leader, a consummate professional, is to do the unthinkable. To tackle the impossible. To touch the untouchable. It was Bonnie who said, “I want this patient myself.” Highly unusual for a head nurse – unconventional – but the stuff out of which human spirits thrive, heal and soar.

As she donned her latex gloves and proceeded to bathe this huge, very unclean man, her heart almost broke. Where was his family? Who was his mother? What was he like as a little boy? She hummed quietly as she worked. It seemed to ease the fear and embarrassment she knew he must be feeling.

And then on a whim she said, “We don’t have time for back rubs much in hospitals these days, but I bet one would really feel good. And it would help you relax your muscles and start to heal. That is what this place is all about . . . a place to heal.”

The thick, scaly, ruddy skin told a story of an abusive lifestyle: probably lots of addictive behavior with food, alcohol and drugs. As she rubbed those taut muscles, she hummed and prayed. Prayed for the soul of a little boy grown up, rejected by life’s rudeness and striving for acceptance in a hard, hostile world.

The finale was warmed lotion and baby powder. Almost laughable – such a contrast to this huge, foreign surface. As he rolled over onto his back, tears ran down his cheeks and his chin trembled. With amazingly beautiful brown eyes, he smiled and said in a quivering voice, “No one has touched me for years. Thank you. I am healing.”

May we each seek out ways, both large and small, both simple and profound, to offer care and nurture – mothering, if you will – to those around us who are in need of it.

I’ve spent most of my time this morning calling on us to expand on our traditional ways of thinking about Mother’s Day in order to be more inclusive and true to our actual experience of life. I’d like to finish by calling on us to return to an old Mother’s Day tradition, dating all the way back to 1870, and lifting up another way for mothers to express and spread their love.

You see, long before Mother’s Day was an official holiday, long before there were any greeting cards involved, Julia Ward Howe conceived a different vision of Mother’s Day. Julia Ward Howe was a Unitarian, a member of Channing Memorial Church, which is today the Unitarian Universalist Church in Newport, Rhode Island. She had lived through the tragedy of the American Civil War, and was well-aware of the ongoing Franco-Prussian War in Europe, which troubled her deeply.

While she reflected on the harm and destruction brought by war, a question arose in Julia’s mind: “Why do not the mothers of mankind interfere in these matters, to prevent the waste of that human life of which they alone bear and know the cost?” In response to these thoughts, Julia Ward Howe drew up what she called a “little document,” which became her Mother’s Day Proclamation, delivered in New York in 1870. It reads as follows:

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 voice 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 our 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 differing nationalities,
The amicable settlement of international questions,
The great and general interests of peace.

In the spirit of Julia Ward Howe’s approach to Mother’s Day, you will find in your order of service a call to action for today’s women, beginning with the symbolic act of “standing to save the world.” Inspired by the book *The Great Silent Gathering of Grandmothers* by Sharon Mehdi, the call on this day on which we honor mothers is for women to stand with families, friends, and strangers, reminding us that saving the world is possible. The hope is that standing in solidarity for five minutes of silence may prompt some serious discussions of how to begin that important but difficult process.

Women across our nation will be participating in this simple action today at one o’clock. If you would like to be part of it, there will be posters available during coffee hour after the service, and folks will be gathering at the UUFCC sign down at Whitehall Road in time to observe the silent vigil at one o’clock.

I can't think of a better way today to share our mothers' love, to pass along the love and care we received, or would like to have received, from our own mothers. This world is certainly in need of a mother's love. May we each do our small part.

So may it be.