

Special Ladies

A Sermon for Worship on Mother's Day Sunday
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
May 14, 2017
Text: John 2:1-11

You wouldn't think Mother's Day would be a controversial holiday, but it is. All those Hallmark and Edible Arrangements ads on television notwithstanding, there is some serious disagreement about Mother's Day and its relevance for modern day life. Nowhere is this controversy more visible than in the church. The reasoning behind the controversy is that there are folks, some of them clergy, who feel that Mother's Day is an inappropriate holiday for the church to endorse in any way for any number of reasons, all of which have some basis in truth.

For example, a number of folks think Mother's Day is a purely secular holiday designed to make money for greeting card companies, candy companies, florists and restaurants. Why should the church endorse such a clearly commercial enterprise, these people ask, and it is indeed a reasonable question. Then there are others, again some of them clergy, who feel that Mother's Day, as well as Father's Day and even Grandparents' Day are inadvisable to recognize in the church because some people have really, really bad relationships with their mothers, fathers, and grandparents reaching the level of severe trauma which the church should play no role in reawakening through observances of

these holidays, albeit with the best of intentions. And still others feel Mother's Day causes women who are not mothers to feel left out, ignored and marginalized. Again, the church should have no role in bringing about this trauma so the holiday becomes taboo.

All of these are valid criticisms of Mother's Day and I understand the emotions, often very raw and painful, behind them. I agree that it's ridiculous that the same Mother's Day plant sold on the day before Mother's Day is likely to be half price the day after Mother's Day. I agree that a \$10 greeting card does not make up for a year's worth of phone calls and visits that didn't happen. I know that some folks who had horrendous relationships with mothers cannot abide this holiday nor can folks who loved mothers now no longer alive. For them this holiday is a painful reminder of what is no longer or never was. I can also appreciate that women who want to have children and have not been able to or women childless by choice struggle on this holiday. I get all these reasons Mother's Day can be genuinely problematic for some people. But, for me, that doesn't mean this holiday has no value in the church. In fact, I believe quite the opposite.

For one thing, Mother's Day *began* in the church. The first celebration of Mother's Day in this country was in 1908 and it took place in St. Andrews Methodist Church in Grafton, WV. The celebration was organized by Anna Jarvis to honor the memory of her mother, Ann Reeves Jarvis, who had been a peace activist

during the Civil War as well as a caregiver to wounded soldiers on both sides of the conflict. Ann Reeves Jarvis herself created Mothers Day Work Clubs to address public health issues which the government of the time was ignoring. By 1911 all the states had some sort of Mothers Day observance and in 1914 President Woodrow Wilson signed a proclamation designating the second Sunday in May as a national holiday to honor the contributions of mothers across the nation. Interestingly, the controversy over the holiday began shortly thereafter as it became quickly commercialized. This infuriated Anna Jarvis who organized protests against this way of celebrating the holiday she always saw as honoring the contributions of women generally and mothers in particular to the betterment of society as a whole.

So, we are left, more than 100 years later with a holiday created with the noblest of intentions and yet one which quickly lost its way over the passing years. Secularization, commercialization, and emotional confusion have obscured the original intentions of the holiday leaving us to ponder, what is the purpose of Mothers Day in our own time? Why is it worthy of our consideration, our recognition, even our celebrations in spite of all the reasons it feels out of date and even inappropriate to some?

Two reasons exist, I believe, which compel us to hold on to our Mother's Day celebrations in the church even as we embrace those very real reasons some have for rejecting it. One is personal

as in remembering the real people, the real flesh and blood women who have touched our lives as mothers or women who have been “like mothers” to us. These are the women for whom the holiday was originally envisioned and created in 1914. The second reason is a scriptural one and yet it clearly relates directly back to the first.

Let’s begin with the real flesh and blood women whose lives provided the inspiration for that first Mother’s Day. Those extraordinary women who fought for abolition and women’s rights even as they worked to resolve all sorts of societal issues the government left unaddressed did not advocate for their own recognition. They did what they did for no other reason than it needed to be done. But one of their own recognized that younger women would have to fight for the recognition of the accomplishments of the older women who inspired them or it would not happen. Mother’s Day came into being because one generation of strong women did not want to see the previous generation of strong women continue to go unrecognized and uncelebrated. Therefore, to me, Mother’s Day was and is still a holiday to recognize and celebrate the contributions of all women, whether they are biological mothers or not, because all women participate in mothering, through word and deed, the generations which follow them.

As I say these words I am thinking in particular of the church women I have had the great privilege to know and love throughout my life. These women inspired me as a child, nurtured me as a young woman, modeled for me how to be a woman of strength and integrity for all of my life continuing today. I think of the women from the church where I grew up: Mrs. Thornton, Mrs. Martin, Mrs. Rizzo, Mrs. Braymer and my own mother and grandmother. I think of the women who encouraged me throughout the early years of my ministry: Mrs. Arden, Mrs. Linberg, Mrs. Pagano, Mrs. Trodson. I think of the women who were like mothers to me as I negotiated my way through the years of training and education which brought me to this point in my life as pastor of this church: Dr. Elisabeth Schussler-Fiorenza, Dr. Karen King, Rev. Gini King, Rev. Elizabeth King, Ms. Susan Dickerman. And, of course, I think of all the incredibly amazing women I have encountered in this church. I would not dare to name you for fear of forgetting someone. But I also think you won't mind if I let one of these amazing women, one recently lost to us, stand in for all the women of this church.

Millie Silver was someone I would describe as quite literally a founding mother of this church. She and her husband Lou were part of the original group of folks who worked to give birth to this new church out of the merger of two other churches, the

Pawcatuck Congregational Church and the Congregational Christian Church of Westerly. Millie was certainly active in the life of the church from the beginning holding various roles and fulfilling varied responsibilities. But Millie's life was far more than church. I didn't realize it until I began visiting her regularly as her health was failing that Millie was an avid horsewoman, riding as often as she could until she was in her mid 70's. She was also the epitome of what I refer to as a "like mother." Millie did have her own children, two sons whom she loved with all her heart. But she also became in later life a "like mom" to a family trying to raise three very young children. Millie became the primary caretaker of these little ones while mom worked, and she referred to those children as "her babies" til the end of her life. Those babies, by the way, are now in college.

As I chatted with Millie in the final weeks of her illness, I saw in her the epitome of a strong woman who knew her own mind but also loved, knew and respected the wants and needs of the people in her life. She lived life on her own terms, as near as I can tell, for all of her life and that is a rare gift. It is also an inspiration to other women who saw in Millie a woman of intelligence, a woman of strength and courage, a woman to be not only loved and admired, but also emulated. Most extraordinary to me about Millie is that she never railed against or complained about or in any way expressed fear or anger about her impending death.

She'd had a long and wonderful life, she told me. She saw only blessings to be counted, not regrets for things left unfinished. She saw possibility beyond the grave to reunite with Lou and all those loved ones she had lost over the years. For that and so many other reasons Millie was and is the kind of woman I aspire to be.

Millie is also the kind of woman whom I think would have gotten along very well with another famous mother. We heard about this other mother in the story from John's Gospel we read for our text this morning. This famous story about the wedding in Cana is the first of Jesus' miracles in John's Gospel and there is no doubt a mother played a vital role in this story. The mother is Jesus' mother whom we know as Mary, but John never names her in this story or anywhere in his Gospel. But we know her name from the other gospels. In any event, in this story Jesus, his disciples and his mother were all attending a wedding in Cana. As often happened in Jesus' time when weddings went on for two or three days, the wine ran out, an embarrassment rising to the level of near catastrophe for the hosts. Jesus' mother realizes what is happening and goes to Jesus with the news. She doesn't ask him to do anything. She just tells him what is happening. And he responds, "woman, what concern is that to you and me? My hour has not yet come." Well that sounds pretty bratty, doesn't it? What mother hasn't pointed out some lack to a child and received a similar huffy response? Unphased by Jesus' remark to her,

Mary turns to the servants and tells them, “do whatever he tells you.” And sure enough Jesus soon comes over and tells them he wants them to refill the giant water jars and then use them to refill the empty wine flagons of the wedding guests. They do as he asks and soon the guests are raving about the exceptional quality of the wine being served so late in the celebration.

“Do whatever he tells you to do.” Those are the words of a woman who knows her child well. She knew who Jesus was and what he had come to do, better than anyone. Maybe even better than he did at this point. She knew how dangerous his mission and ministry would be. She knew she could not protect him from the danger or keep him from his destiny. This was a woman who knew her son and knew her duty and responsibility not just as a mother, but even more as a follower of God who had had the courage to say yes to being a mother under such extraordinary circumstances as being the mother of Jesus meant. She said yes then and she encouraged her son to say yes in this moment when it was time for him to grow beyond who he had been to who God needed him to become. In doing that, Mary stands as role model and mentor for all of us, women and men, who are entrusted by God with the sacred task of nurturing the next generation to the point where they can become who God needs them to be.

Certainly, none of us are Mary, the woman who entrusted her very life to God. But all of us are capable of doing what Mary did –

encouraging those who follow us to step up and step out into God's plans for them when the moment is upon them.

Extraordinary women are all around us. Some are easy to spot and others not so much. Some are mothers and some are not. That's why I encourage you on this Mothers Day to look beyond the fancy greeting cards and brunches, beyond the edible arrangements and the garden plants. I hope you will look beyond all of that to see the extraordinary women in your life and do just one thing – say thank you to them. Say, thank you for being you and being in my life. That's all anybody wants to hear on any given day, mother or not. Now's your chance. Don't miss it. Amen.