

## ***Beloved Jesus***

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship on Mother's Day Sunday  
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

May 8, 2016

Text: John 21:20-25

So, who is celebrating Mother's Day today? [pause] How?  
[pause] When you think of your mom, what words come to mind?  
[pause] If we're very lucky, our memories and thoughts of our  
mothers are at least mostly happy, but not always. After all,  
moms are human too. They make mistakes. We all make  
mistakes, so why shouldn't moms? Here's my next question for  
you – if you had to describe Mother's Day in a word or two, what  
would those words be? [pause] That may seem like a strange  
question for today but I'm genuinely interested and here's why.

I've been involved in a bit of an on-line tiff with some of my  
UCC colleagues across the country since yesterday. I don't  
normally respond to posts folks put up on Facebook unless it's a  
friend or someone I'm close to but this time, for some reason, I  
did because I felt I had to. And let's just say it's been interesting.  
A colleague, someone pretty well known nationally although still a  
local church pastor, posted a message that she wasn't preaching  
about Mother's Day on Mother's Day because she just didn't want  
to. She was tired of all the sentimentalism around the observance  
and the unrealistic expectations of women she felt it set up. She  
asked if others felt the same way. Because she is so well known

there was an avalanche of responses, all agreeing with her and talking about their sermon topics which ranged far and wide, but nowhere close to anything about Mother's Day. So I posted what my sermon plans for this morning were – to address the subject of Mother's Day head on because of the vital role women, whether mothers or “like-mothers,” play in the faith development of their children and grandchildren.

Well, my response elicited perhaps not an avalanche of responses, but some for sure. And one or two were not too kind. Folks were throwing around thoughts like reinforcing binary gendered thinking (I'll explain that to anyone interested at coffee hour) and setting up unrealistic expectations of women. A few even suggested that to preach about mothers on Mother's Day was adding to the pain of people who had poor relationships with their mothers. But, I have to admit my favorite response was from the person who said she didn't go anywhere near Mother's Day in her sermon for today because she viewed her church as a sanctuary from the overwhelming “pink sentimentality” of Mother's Day rampant in society. Oh my goodness.

Now, I get the comment about the pain Mother's Day holds for some people – women who wanted children and never had them and women whose own mothers were non-existent or drug addicts or neglectful or abusers. But, to my way of thinking, that's where preaching needs to be able to go – right into the painful

spots of our souls to confront the pain and hold it tenderly in word and prayer. And I don't see how you can live in the society we live in, where Mother's Day references in media, in stores, and even on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, are positively saturating. Mother's Day is where people's minds and hearts are this morning so how can the church not go there? That was the question I posed to my colleagues, and no one answered that question. Instead they continued on their rants, individually and collectively, about making Mother's Day a focal point of worship. So much so that I was surprised, and disappointed.

But here we are this morning, in the midst of Mother's Day, and I am so glad we are. As I pondered my online conversation of yesterday, I found myself thinking about something I had read just Friday morning in Peter Gomes' book, *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus*. Gomes, the Pusey Professor of Homiletics (preaching) at Harvard as well as chaplain of the university during my first two years on campus, was an incredible preacher. And he believed in preaching the bible, like I do. One of his most forceful observations about the bible and preaching was the realization that the question "what would Jesus do?" is the most frightening question in the bible, because the answers are seldom what we would want them to be. Gomes says that Jesus was always challenging the people around him to expand their thinking about God to see God as relational to us, not as just some distant divine

being issuing dictates. Instead we are to remember that Jesus cared most about how people related to God and each other as a result of their relationship with God.

That's why I'm fairly confident that Jesus would agree with my decision to preach about Mother's Day, as well as about Father's Day, as I will in June. Jesus last thoughts of his earthly life as he was dying on the cross were to make sure his mother was taken care of and he assigned that task to the Beloved Disciple. We've encountered this mysterious Beloved Disciple quite a bit during this Eastertide, and we encountered him again this morning as we read the ending of the Gospel of John. That the disciples were jealous of the Beloved Disciple's relationship with Jesus is pretty apparent. Jesus and the disciples were walking along, probably to the hill where the ascension would shortly take place, when Peter noticed the Beloved Disciple following them. That's when Peter asks Jesus flat out, "what about him?" Jesus gives a rather sharp response ending with, "what is it to you?" Clearly Jesus' relationship with this Beloved Disciple, to whom he entrusted the care of his mother as he was dying, was unique and profound. Clearly, the disciples knew this and didn't know how to handle it. Clearly, Jesus didn't care.

As we've discussed previously, we don't know who this Beloved Disciple was. Some people think it was John, author of the Gospel and one of the 12. I'm not so sure. I've told you

previously about the theory that the Beloved Disciple was Lazarus whom Jesus raised from the dead. There's also the theory made famous by Dan Brown in *The DaVinci Code* that the Beloved Disciple was Mary Magdalene, who was also Jesus' wife. The truth is, we'll never know who the Beloved Disciple was. But I do have another thought that I'd like to share with you, and this thought comes from my mother which is why it's so pertinent for today.

When I was a little girl, I was very shy and very sheltered and over-protected by my parents since I was their only girl and the youngest of their three children by a lot. This was a recipe for a loving home where I was encouraged always to reach for the stars. But it also made for a lonely childhood since I just didn't have a lot of friends. We literally lived in the big white house on the hill in my hometown which meant other children made assumptions about me as being stuck up and wealthy, neither of which were true. I was just really, really shy. And really, really lonely. So much so that one day I was crying in my room. My mom heard me and came to see what was wrong. I told her that I was just so lonely and I didn't know how to cope with not having friends. That's when she gave me the greatest gift she ever could have. She said to me, "but you do have a friend, and he is always with you. He's with you in school when the work is hard or the children are unkind. He's with you here at home, even when you're sleeping. He's with you when we go on vacation or go to the mall. He's

always with you.” I was somewhat unnerved by this because I was only 6 and the thought of some strange man lurking around that I couldn’t see was scary to put it mildly. So I asked my mom who this mysterious person was and she looked at me, smiled and said, “Jesus.” Then she reminded me of one of my favorite hymns – and hers – “What A Friend We Have in Jesus.” She told me that whenever I felt scared or lonely or confused, I could just sing that song and reach for Jesus and he would reach back. Always.

In that moment, my mother gave me the gift of a relationship with Jesus that has been with me for all of my life, transforming me and my life over and over again. Jesus is not a concept to me. Jesus is not some kind of cosmic eraser whose only purpose is to take away sins replacing them with a one way ticket to heaven. That doesn’t mean I don’t see Jesus as my Savior, because he is. Jesus saved me from an empty life in which I would never have known who he was and who he is in my life. Jesus saves me from all the things in life that would pull me away from God, and they are legion. Jesus saves me from fear and loneliness walking with me anytime they threaten to overwhelm. That’s why it makes complete sense to me that Jesus had this special, special friend who was the Beloved Disciple. He needed that friend and God provided that friend, whoever it was.

And that’s why I have one more suggestion about who the Beloved Disciple might be. Dear friends, the Beloved Disciple can

be you and it can be me, if only we will let that relationship blossom. We are already beloved of Jesus and he is always reaching out to us. We know this. So, the issue becomes, are we reaching back to Jesus? Is Jesus' beloved of us or is he just a means to an end of some sort? By the way, theologians have a name for this kind of relationship with Jesus. It's called the "Scandal of the Particular." Jesus is no longer some lofty figure, removed from the realities of life we face each day. Instead, your relationship with Jesus is so intimate that it moves Jesus from sitting only at God's right hand to sitting with you as friend and companion through life.

This is who Jesus is to me and it's because of my mother. So, dear friends, how could I not preach about Mother's Day, pitfalls and all? I know Jesus because of my mother and I am very fortunate because that happened for only the best of reasons – a mother who loved her daughter and wanted her daughter to know what she had figured out about Jesus. I also know that all mother daughter relationships are not wonderful. Some are nonexistent. Some are painful and confusing. Those painful voids and memories are real and should also be honored on this day in which we celebrate mothers. My hope is that even those folks who had poor relationships or even no relationship with their mothers were blessed with someone who was like a mother to them, someone who gave advice when it was needed or stayed silent

when words wouldn't help. Someone who loved them when they needed it and cared for them when bodies were aching or hearts were breaking. God blesses us with those people in our lives, if only we will recognize them for who they are. And in so doing, God is reminding us just how beloved we are to God, just as beloved as God's own son. The truth is, dear friends, that we can be the Beloved Disciple, Jesus' best and closest friend and he can be that to us, if only we are willing. My mother taught me that. And my life changed forever in that moment. I hope her gift to me also finds its way to you. What you do with that gift, though, is totally up to you. Amen.