

I have always found it both challenging and enjoyable to share a message on a Sunday that is also a national holiday, and Mother's Day is no exception. The joy comes from acknowledging the ideals represented by the holiday, and how they relate to our faith. The challenge arises from the reality that, like the ways we live out our faith claims, the ideals celebrated are accompanied by obvious failures and contradictions.

You may know that Mother's Day became an official US holiday in 1914, after Anna Jarvis had been working toward that end for several years. She had two original goals in mind for the day: to establish a holiday based upon celebration of women and to lift up the ideals of motherhood. Her mother had started a tradition in West Virginia of families honoring their mothers that included teaching parenting skills to mothers. She also promoted it within her Methodist Church as a pathway to reconciliation within a town that was severely divided during and after the Civil war, figuring no one would object to celebrating Moms. Julia Ward Howe also promoted a day of celebrating Moms, with a different agenda: pushing for full citizen rights for women, including the right to vote.

As Christ-followers, we know that we are also pursuing idealistic goals for ourselves and the world we live in. As both of this morning's readings remind us, our call is to a loving life. I remember when I first started attending church with my wife at the beginning of our marriage, nearly 46 years ago. I grew up in a wonderful family that had no church involvement, so I was unsure what to expect. But I came to religion with an expectation that the main goal would be to learn a long list of rules and how to determine when and how they would be applied in my life. But I was pleased to eventually discover that there are really only two rules, both of which start with love: love the Lord our God with our hearts, minds and strength/being, and love our neighbors as we ourselves are loved by God. So much easier to remember! At the same time, those two rules are very challenging to live out, especially when we remember that our neighbors include people we don't like, trust or even want to like!

Like Jesus and the great apostle Paul, the author of 1<sup>st</sup> Peter was sending words of instruction and encouragement, intended in this case to reach the followers in several churches in what we think of as the Mideast. He knew that one of the serious challenges of living lives centered in active, intentionally loving others is not as popular or well-received as one might hope. Jesus himself had advised his disciples that they should expect to meet with great opposition from both the established religious leadership and the very neighbors they were called to love in word and deed. So, the instruction he send was not to argue strongly with those who were not ready to accept such a teaching, trying to win them over by proving they were right. No, the instruction was to trust God and always be prepared to “offer a defense, humbly and respectfully, when someone asks why you live in hope.” Accepting suffering – which might mean being subjected to angry tirades, insults and social exclusion, or the sort of suffering Jesus experienced most frequently, which was the frustration of seeing so many people seeking after rewards and focusing on changing others rather than doing the deep inner work necessary to align themselves with God’s goals of inclusion, reconciliation and well-being for all.

Also knowing that the Way of Christ-following is a narrow path due to its intentional rejection of placing oneself above others and seeking well-being for all rather than gaining an advantage, the message also reminded the congregations that they were involved in a minority community. I am going to be bold here even though we don’t know each other, by acknowledging me strong belief that Christianity has never been, nor is it likely ever to be, a path followed by a majority of people, much less any nation-state. While we Americans still, even in this era of shrinking church memberships, tend to identify with Christianity, we know that claiming the name is far easier than living the life! As a Baptist minister once told me, ‘spending a lot of time in a garage doesn’t make you a car’ – and I would add it doesn’t even make one a mechanic – sitting in pews does not in and of itself lead to Christian formation. But it sure can be a great starting place!

Just as Jesus explained to Peter on the night of his last supper before being arrested, as he began to wash the feet of his followers, the goal was not cleaning their bodies, but teaching them to accept God's tender love and humble themselves enough to share that same love with others, so it is that the waters of our baptisms is not intended to clean our bodies. Instead, it is a rite of passage from loving oneself over and against others to loving ourselves even when we know we have not acted lovingly and loving others the same way.

You probably recognized the reading from John's gospel as one often included in funeral and memorial services, taken from what is sometimes called the Farewell Teaching. Like the author of 1<sup>st</sup> Peter, Jesus was trying to 'put the heart into' his followers as he prepared them for his bodily departure. He assured them that they would not be abandoned, but the next step in their journey would be with the Spirit of Truth, who would remind them of everything Jesus had taught and showed them, and help them feel their way into using those teachings. And once again, the instruction focuses on living lovingly. Every time we do that, we are reconnected with Jesus through the Spirit even as we connect with both the people around us and our own best versions. And just like physical rehearsal and exercise, each act of loving others, especially under challenging circumstances – like an exhausted mother walking the floor with a colicky child in the middle of the night – we strengthen our identity as Christ-followers.

We know we do this imperfectly, just as we know mothers are not always as loving as they'd like to be or we wish they were. But our calling is to keep practicing, to forgive ourselves because we trust God forgives us even as we rededicate ourselves to the goal of making love our central pathway and lifestyle. In this way we are able to fully celebrate our Mothers and the institution of motherhood even while we are aware of flaws and failures, and in the same way continue our spiritual journeys toward our very best versions! May it be so, may it be so!