

LEARNING LOVE

John 17.19-26

May 8, 2016, Mother's Day

Tim Phillips, Seattle First Baptist Church

Gathering

[Honoring Imogene Williams and Alice Franklin Bryant]

I always think it is good to begin this Mother's Day Sunday remembering that it is rooted in a proclamation by Julia Ward Howe in 1870 calling for justice, healing, and peace following the devastation of the Civil War.

Long before Hallmark got ahold of it, Mother's Day was a call to action: "Arise, then, women of this day! Arise all women who have hearts, whether our baptism be that of water or of tears!"

What Julia Ward Howe imagined was a great gathering of women "to promote the alliance of different nationalities, the amicable settlement of international questions [in] the great and general interests of peace."

So it seems to me that one of the important ways to honor Mother's Day is to celebrate those women among us who have continued this work for healing and justice and peace. One of those women in the last generation was Alice Franklin Bryant, one of our foremothers here at Seattle First Baptist Church and a resident of Capitol Hill. Alice was teaching school in the Philippines during WWII when she and her husband William were captured by the Japanese and they spent the next two years in an internment camp barely holding on to life. Eventually they were released and returned to the U.S. where they were given reparation money from the government. Following the war and the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Alice gave that reparation money to build a community house in Hiroshima and delivered it with a letter apologizing for the destruction. She returned later to Hiroshima to help build houses and spent the rest of her life in the service of reconciliation, human rights, justice and peace. Alice died on June 7, 1977.

I think Julia Ward Howe would be pleased to know that we are gathering today to celebrate Mother's Day by remembering Alice Franklin Bryant. And to recognize that work as it continues in this generation with Imogene Williams, the daughter of Alice Franklin Bryant.

Imogene, we give thanks for you on this Mother's Day and we pray that your work and your mother's work and the work of Julia Ward Howe will continue on in the generations to come.

“Arise, then, all people” of this day and sing together that “war be learned no longer, that strife and tumult cease and all earth a blessed garden that God shall tend in peace.”

Reflection: Bruce Chittick

Good Morning.

My name is Bruce Chittick. And although I have been a member of this church for near 20 years, was married in this church, was ordained by this church, served as interim Family and Youth Pastor prior to Ned coming 6 years ago, I would venture to say that most of you know me mostly as one of Spencer's dads.

And that's okay – that is a great thing to be known as.

So why is a Dad up here speaking on Mother's Day?

I saw a cartoon recently that might help explain. It is a two panel cartoon both of parishioners speaking to their pastor after a church service. In the first panel, the female parishioner says to the pastor “How dare you fail to preach about Mother's Day! How could you be so heartless?!” In the second panel, after the service the next year, a male parishioner says to the pastor, “What were you thinking, preaching about Mother's Day? Since when does Hallmark guide the lectionary?!”

Blessings on you Tim, as you receive “feedback” after today's service.

Recently, Spencer won the coveted Maple Medal at his elementary school. The Maple Medal is given to a student each week who best exemplifies the ideals set forth by the school. As part of winning, the student gets to fill out a large poster telling his classmates about himself. In the section in which he was to draw a picture of his family, Spencer drew a Dad, a mom, and two kids, a boy and a girl. When we asked him why he chose to draw that, he said, he wanted to be cool. Spencer attends an urban school with all kinds of family diversity and where all families are treated alike. He lives in a city like that and attends this church, which also has that message, yet somehow, the image of the ideal 1950s family still rears its way into his perception of reality, even though that is the norm for less than 30% of families in the United States.

And that is one of the many reasons that we are grateful for this faith community. When she was first lady, Hillary Clinton wrote a book called *It Takes a Village*, which some conservatives are now using to accuse her of advocating that parents not be the primary influences in a child's life. But I think she is addressing the reality that an enormous village of people surround and influence children as they grow and mature.

In Spencer's world, Seattle First Baptist Church has been an enormous part of that village. From the moment he first entered the doors of this building at 2 weeks old, he has been embraced with nothing but love and affection.

Milla has been in the nursery from the time he was an infant, and 9 years later he still loves to go into the nursery and hang out.

The year Spencer was born, 9 babies were born to church families in a period of 10 months. Jane Herness wanted to do something to help support them and came up with the idea of having some of the Grandmothers of the church watch the babies for a few hours every other Friday to allow parents to get some quiet time alone. Jane, Phyllis

Hasselblad, Marilyn Pulliam, Priscilla McCartney, and many others provided a warm, safe, loving environment for Spencer and the rest of those babies.

Belle Chenault has taught the children of this church music for generations, finding ways that even the youngest can be involved and learn to love music and participate in worship in this church.

Joanne Hjort ensures that Spencer and the rest of the children are included in theater program of the church. When Spencer insisted that he wanted to play the giant turnip in this year's production, Joanne rewrote the play so that the formerly silent turnip would have lines. She also spent hours working on creating a turnip costume Joanne and Dennis have made a point of attending Spencer's plays at Stone Soup Theatre to support his interest in the theatre.

Thanks to Belle and Joanne, Spencer has a love of the arts that he would never have found in the limited exposure he has at school.

Each Sunday, in the family time in the youth room and during Sunday school, Naomi, Sarah, and Susan play games with Spencer and expand the wide circle of love and inclusion he feels in this building.

On the first Wednesday of each month, when we help set the tables for dinner, Amber or CJ warmly welcome him and thank him for his help. And at dinner itself, Spencer looks forward to seeing so many of you and playing with his friends, especially from the Zaugg Black clan. And on Sunday mornings, during the time of greeting, Spencer loves to run to the organ to see Michelle, and then to greet many of his friends in the choir.

Many of you often tell Russ and I what great parents, Russ and I are because of the person Spencer is turning out to be. But in truth, you all are a huge part of the person Spencer is becoming. It does indeed take a

village to raise a child. And we are thankful that this faith community is a huge portion of that village for Spencer.

Reflection: Megan Walker

Mother's day is complicated for me. Too many times it is used to celebrate not actual mothers, but the myth of motherhood that our culture has created. Myth Mother always loves her children and says the exact thing they need to hear. Myth Mother sacrifices her entire self for her children. Myth Mother cooks and cleans and nurtures and loves and shuttles children to their activities and now often works as well.

I don't actually know anyone who has that mother. Most people I know have complicated relationships with their mothers, because they and their mothers are complicated people. Most mothers I know are doing the best they can, but they make mistakes. They lose their tempers sometimes, they forget soccer practice once in awhile, they have to work late and need someone else to get the kids from school.

Most mothers I know also split the traditional "mothering" roles with their partners. They do half the bedtimes, half the snuggles, wipe half the tears, do half of the pick-ups and drop-offs. It becomes harder to celebrate a cultural Myth Mother when everyone's mother does a different mix of caretaking roles.

And yet I like getting breakfast in bed once a year. I like getting flowers and having a morning off and I still think mothers and fathers are worth celebrating. I just wish it was okay to say "Thank you Mom for being the best mom you could be. For loving me as best as you were able, and for helping me to become the person I am today." I wish it was okay to honor our mothers for their own unique strengths and weaknesses, and for the important roles they played in our specific lives. That would be a more complicated Mother's day, but a more honest and life-giving one.

Reflection & Lesson

[from "A Song on Mother's Day"]

*"... whether they adopted, chose us, claimed or gave us birth,
they have loved and listened, counseled, cheered
and helped us know our worth."*

God bless that line of people – no matter how long or short or women or men – who have taught us not only *about* love but *how* to love.

I have a question for you this morning. Do you think loving is something that just comes naturally to us or is it something we have to learn?

Perhaps even if love is like a seed that is planted in the human heart, it seems to me that, it is something that has to be cultivated and nurtured and tended. I think we can be pretty clear that, at the very least, love is not something to be taken for granted.

Pastor Ned was talking last week about the importance of loving yourself – looking in the mirror and loving that person staring back at you.

Some of you seem much better at that than I am. Maybe it is instinctive for you. But I had to learn that kind of love. There is nothing natural for me to look in the mirror and say, "I love you." For too many years what I saw when I looked in that mirror was disappointment and even disgust. The best I could manage on a good day was pity – and that's still a long way from love.

To the extent that I do know something of what it is to love myself in the process of loving other people, I have had to learn it.

So I will say again: God bless that line of folks who ... adopted me – Susan Thistlethwaite, the seminary professor who said she could only imagine how hard it must have been to grow up a gay Baptist

kid and she said, “I just want you to know that I would be proud to have you for a son.” Or the very proper, head usher at Lake Street Church in Evanston, Bob Jones, who always wore a suit and tie and never went in for any of that “mushy stuff” but who, after a sermon I preached about being a prodigal son, threw his arms around me and told me he would always be happy to welcome me home.

I have learned something about loving by being “adopted.”

Then there were those who chose me. I am probably still scarred by all those times being chosen last – grudgingly -- on the softball field. But I remember the day in middle school when my sister, who was a great athlete and was always chosen first, said that any team that wanted her was also taking me because we were a packaged deal. I was chosen.

I have learned something about loving by being “chosen.”

And then there are those who claimed me – those who have come to call me their “other son.” And the one who gave me birth who hung in there with me when things were tough.

I have learned something about loving by being “claimed.”

For all those who have loved and listened, counseled, cheered and helped me know my worth, I thank God for you.

In the biblical tradition, this is exactly the language it uses for the way God loves us ...

We are “adopted,” as Paul likes to say, “We have been adopted as children so that we cry out ‘Abba’” – the Aramaic word for a parent like Papa or Mama. And chosen – “you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood;” you are a packaged deal. And claimed by the One who gave us birth. And it is seeing ourselves in the reflection of that mirror that we come to learn “our worth” as “beloved ones.”

In John's gospel, Jesus is pictured as that mirror – that looking at ourselves through the mirror of Jesus we learn to see ourselves as we really are. And we learn to see other people in that mirror too.

That's the lesson we have today from John 17. I'm reading from the *Inclusive Bible* which uses that word "Abba" when Jesus refers to his father.

By the way, I just finished reading a new book by the great process theologian at Claremont, John Cobb. He says that we have got ourselves all hung up on the idea of "God Almighty" when what Jesus is talking about when he talks about God is "Abba" – the language of a different kind of power, one that is built on the intimacy of relationship and what it is that we learn when we are practicing love. It is "baby talk," he says that conjures up that longing for love between a parent and child.

And Cobb makes this interesting historical connection between the faith of the Middle Ages when the church moved toward God as a mirror of their own almighty power and the people moved toward Mary because, "In Mary," he says, "God became again the Abba of Jesus," the mirror of tenderness and intimacy and longing.

So, if John Cobb is right, the *Inclusive Bible* is right to identify the "father" in Jesus' prayer of John 17 as "Abba."

John 17.19-26

*"I consecrate myself now for their sakes,
that they be made holy in truth.*

[Perhaps this is what we would call "integrity."]

*I don't pray for them alone.
I pray also for those
who will believe in me through their message,
that all may be one,
as you, Abba, are in me and I in you;*

*I pray that they may be one in us,
so that the world may believe that you sent me.
I have given them the glory you gave me
that they may be one, as we are one –
I in them, you in me –
that they may be made perfect in unity.*

[“Holy in truth; perfect in unity.” There are echoes here of Julia Ward Howe’s Mother’s Day call for a world-wide gathering of women, united in the desire for justice and peace.]

*Then the world will know that you sent me,
and that you loved them as you loved me.*

[Jesus is that mirror of the way God loves us.]

*Abba, I ask that those you gave me
may be here with me,
because of the love you had for me
before the foundation of the world.
Righteous One, the world hasn’t known you,
but I have;
and these people know
that you sent me.
To them I have revealed your Name, [Abba]
and I will continue to reveal it
so that the love you have for me
may live in them,
just as I may live in them.”*

For John, one of the evidences of the resurrection is that the love God demonstrated in Jesus is alive in us.

And, frankly, if I want to have any integrity about my life, I have to say that I am still in the process of learning that kind of love. And the best way I know how to learn it, is with you.

And what I have discovered is that if this is the kind of love you are trying to learn, any place can be your classroom and any person your teacher.

Take the Personnel Commission meeting this last Thursday. Who would have thought at the very heart of “organized religion” I would learn something about love?

But Phil read this prayer he brought back to us from a lay preacher in a little village church in the Bahamas. And it goes like this ...

God of all blessings, source of all life, giver of all grace:

*We thank you for the gift of life: for the breath that sustains life,
for the food of this earth that nurtures life,
for the love of family and friends without which there would be no life.*

I am learning the love that is gratitude; that does not take the gifts of life for granted.

We thank you for the mystery of creation:

*for the beauty that the eye can see, for the joy that the ear may hear,
for the unknown that we cannot behold ... filling the universe with
wonder,
for the expanse of space that draws us beyond the definitions of our
selves.*

I am learning the love that can celebrate the unknown; that holds the world in wonder; that doesn't have to figure everything out in order to appreciate the gift of life.

We thank you for setting us in communities:

*for families who nurture our becoming,
for friends who love us by choice,
for companions at work, who share our burdens and daily tasks,
for strangers who welcome us into their midst*

This was shocking to me because we work so hard to be a “welcoming church” where we welcome the stranger but this asks us to be grateful to those strangers that welcome us!

*for people from other lands who call us to grow in our understanding,
for children who lighten our moments with delight,
and who offer us hope for the future.*

I’m learning the love that doesn’t give up on the world.

*We thank you for the guidance and protection that you gave to our
forefathers and mothers who journeyed into an unfamiliar world ... with
the faith and fortitude that enabled them to create a home, not just for
themselves but for the generations that followed.*

I am learning that love is home-making for more than just me.

*We thank you for this day;
for life and one more day to love,
for opportunity and one more day to work for justice and peace,
for neighbors and one more person to love and by whom be loved,
for your grace and one more experience of your presence,
for your promise: to be with us ... and to be our Abba.*

I’m learning the kind of love that never runs out of opportunities to love and to be loved.

And if I am learning that kind of love, any place can be a classroom and any person a teacher.

So today, I give thanks for those who adopted, chose, claimed and gave me birth; for the strangers who welcome me; for the people who are a challenge to me; for the partners who strengthen me; and for the love that calls me home.

And today if you hear that voice, do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

John Cobb’s new book is *Jesus’ Abba: The God Who Has Not Failed* (Fortress Press, 2015), see “Abba” pp.4ff and about Mary, p.37.