

THE MANY NAMES OF LOVE

John 15.9 & 12- 15

Mother's Day, May 10, 2015

Seattle First Baptist Church

GATHERING (read by Katie Van Koevering)

The celebration of Mother's Day is rooted in commitments beyond our own desire – or the commandment – to ‘honor our fathers and our mothers.’

Anna Jarvis was a young Appalachian homemaker who, in 1858, had attempted to organize what she called “Mothers’ Work Days” for better sanitary conditions in both the North and South. After the Civil War, her work continued in various attempts to reconcile Union and Confederate neighbors. Anna’s daughter – also named Anna Jarvis – took up her mother’s work and advocated for these Mothers’ Work Days into the early 1900s. In 1907, that first Mother’s Day was celebrated in West Virginia in the church where the elder Anna Jarvis had taught Sunday School.

The Mother’s Day Anna Jarvis imagined was a commitment for all of us to do the work of healing and reconciliation.

Julia Ward Howe, who wrote the words to our opening hymn, imagined a “Mother’s Day for Peace.” Like Anna Jarvis, she too had witnessed the devastation of the Civil War that left hundreds of thousands dead; children orphaned; and mothers widowed. In 1870, distressed by her experiences and seeing war rising again in Europe, she called for women everywhere to rise up and oppose war in all its forms. “Arise then ... women of this day!” she writes:

Arise, all women who have hearts! Whether your baptism be of water or tears!
Say firmly: “We shall not have questions answered by irrelevant agencies ... Our sons will not be taken from us to unlearn all that we have 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 others.” ... 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 her 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 some place deemed most convenient, and the earliest period consistent with its objects, to promote the alliance of different nationalities, the amicable settlement of international questions, and the great and general interests of peace.

Famous as she is for the words of the “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” Julia Ward Howe had no interest in glorifying war. She saw the aftermath. What she was calling for was that all that passion and energy that went into war would be aimed toward the truth of a new direction.

The Mother’s Day Julia Ward Howe imagined was a commitment for all of us to do the work of justice and peace.

So today, in the spirit of Anna Jarvis and Julia Ward Howe and all those women and men who are doing the work of healing, reconciliation, justice and peace,

Arise then people of *this* day!

Arise.

Take counsel together.

Aim your passion in the direction of that truth that marches on.

LESSON: John 15.9 & 12-15(Inclusive Bible)

As my Abba has loved me, so have I loved you.

Abide in my love ...

I tell you all this that my joy may be yours,
and your joy may be complete.

This is my commandment;
love one another as I have loved you.

There is no greater love
than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.

And you are my friends,
if you do what I command you.

I do not call you servants any longer,
because the servant does not know what the master is doing.

I have called you friends
because I have made known to you everything

I have heard from my Abba.

SERMON: *The Many Names of Love*

Our celebration today teaches us that Mother’s Day is rooted in many things.

It’s rooted in a daughter’s commitment to continue her mother’s work of healing and reconciliation.

It's rooted in an activist's call for women to subvert the world's male-dominated addiction to war and to gather, "*all* women of tender heart," across boundaries and national borders to do the work of justice and peace. Find a Mother's Day card for that one.

It's rooted in a mother's and grandmother's hope that their own children, and other people's children, will find a safe place to call home – a place somewhere beyond bullying to belonging.

It's rooted in anxiety and opportunity -- anxiety about not being ready for whatever happens next and the opportunity to welcome that new life that is just being born in us.

Our celebration of Mother's day, in other words, is not rooted in one thing or in one experience or in one's *lack* of an experience but in many things.

So regardless of how it might seem, today is not about having or being the perfect mother. It's not about finding the perfect Hallmark card because it's not about a card. It's about a calling – that, for the sake of loving that new life being born in us, we are willing to put our own lives on the line.

Call it "motherhood" or "fatherhood" or, as Jesus does in John 15, "friendship," it is tapping into that love that makes us ready to be the beloved ones we are called to be.

"As my Abba has loved me, so have I loved you," Jesus says. And the *Inclusive Bible* uses that Aramaic form of the name that speaks, some scholars say, of tenderness and care that sounds more like "Daddy" or "Papa," than an all-powerful parent.

"*Abide* in that love," Jesus says, and then he says, "There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's *friends* ... I do not call you servants any longer ... I name you something new; I call you *friends*."

I was thinking about this as I was watching the Bruce Jenner interview. It will be interesting to see how this all turns out as Jenner makes this transition to live aligned with that feminine self that Jenner has not been allowed to be.

What struck me most were the children – all 10 of them, including those 6 infamous Kardashians. They all say what a loving parent Jenner has been to them and how they all want to be supportive. And there is this moment in the interview

when one of the sons says to Jenner: “We love you and support you and we just want to know what you want us to call you.”

I could hear this text from John 15 about “abiding” – about that enduring quality of presence that can move us from naming someone in one way to name them another. This seems to come up a lot when Jesus is talking about love. The Samaritan becomes neighbor. The enemy becomes beloved one. Servants become friends. The love that is able to do that is the enduring kind. The abiding kind. The kind that will lay down life for that new life being born in us.

Whatever name they choose for their child, Hannah and Justin are about to get a new name too – Mom and Dad. And that new name will mean a whole new way of life.

For years, the names of people in committed relationships were “husband” and “wife.” But we knew that there were other names for that kind of love: partner, beloved one, friend.

Thanks to voters in the state of Washington, some of those partners and beloved ones and friends are now also named “husband” and “wife.” But that experience, I think, should make us mindful that there are many names of love. There is more than one name or one experience or one form of love that has this enduring quality of presence.

Back in the early 90s Mary Hunt wrote a book about the experience of women’s friendships that could teach us something about abiding love – about the nature of love itself and power and embodiment and spirituality. How is it, she wants to know, that one or two kinds of relationship got named as the standard for love when any one of us can have friends or *be* friends?

Friendship is ancient and democratic and even has the potential for justice-making. We could change the world by making friends of strangers.

In her book she includes this poem, printed at the beginning of your bulletin, by May Sarton written at the height of the AIDS crisis. It was a time when parents were abandoning their own children. Family and friends were turning their backs on those who had been beloved ones. And May Sarton wrote her poem in celebration of the community of abiding love that developed -- those caregivers that became parents and families and friends to those who were dying.

*As closed hands open to each other
Closed lives open to strange tenderness.*

*We are learning the hard way how to mother.
Who says it is easy? But we have the power.
I watch the faces deepen all around me.
It is the time of change, the saving hour.
The word is not fear, the word we live,
But an old word suddenly made new,
As we learn it again, as we bring it alive:
Love. Love. Love. Love.*

A community of caregivers was “learning the hard way how to mother,” Sarton says, because they were laying down their lives for one another and tapping into that “old word suddenly made new.”

I think some communities get this. One of my favorite stories about Dr. King is the one he tells about “Mother Pollard.” Mothering in his community wasn’t just about progeny. It was about a kind of presence.

And things had been rough for Dr. King. He had been arrested and threatened and at the doors of despair. But he had to preach. And after the sermon, here comes Mother Pollard. “What’s wrong with you?” she asked. “Nothing,” Dr. King said. But Mother Pollard couldn’t be fooled. She knew. “Are those white folks bothering you again?” she said, “because we are with you.” And then she came in close and said, “And even if we ain’t with you, God’s gonna take care of you.” *Since that dreary night in 1956, Dr. King writes, Mother Pollard has passed on to glory and I have known very few quiet days. I have been tortured without and tormented within ... I have been forced to muster what strength and courage I have to withstand the howling winds of pain and ... adversity. But as the years have unfolded the eloquently simple words of Mother Pollard have come back again and again to give light and peace and guidance to my troubled soul. “God’s gonna take care of you.”*

Mother Pollard embodies the kind of enduring presence that knows you well enough to know when you aren’t being true to yourself. It’s the kind of community that has learned the hard way how to mother. It’s the name of the many kind of relationships that are teaching us that old word suddenly made new. That word is not fear. It’s love.

Our celebration today is not about the perfect mother or the perfect card. It’s about a calling:

It's the call to continue the work of healing and reconciliation.

It's the call to do the activists' work of justice and peace.

It's the call to make a safe place to call home for our children and other people's children.

It's about tapping into that Great Big Love that moves us to name people in new ways and to lay down our lives for that new life that is being born in us.

It is the community that knows us well enough to know when we are being untrue to ourselves and can teach us something about an old word suddenly made new.

Don't worry. There are many names for it. But it all comes down to this –
Abiding Love.

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

NOTES

The material for the Gathering about Anna Jarvis and Julia Ward Howe is available on the web. We regularly use the *Inclusive Bible* in worship. Mary Hunt's book is *Fierce Tenderness: A Feminist Theology of Friendship* (Crossroad Publishing Company, 1991/2). The Sarton poem is on p.115. Dr. King tells the story of Mother Pollard in his sermon, "Antidotes for fear," included in the anthology, *Strength to Love* (Fortress Press, 1963), pp.125-126.