

Fifth Sunday of Easter -B
Mothers Day
Steve Domienik

Acts 8:26-40
1 John 4:7-21
John 15:1-8

In the name of the Loving One, the Wise One and the Understanding One. Amen.

Happy Mother's Day to you (2x)
Happy Mother's Day dear St. John's,
Happy Mother's Day to you! (sung to the tune of Happy Birthday).

Now those of you who are mothers might be saying, "Ah, that's sweet Steve, thank you." And those of you who are not mothers might be thinking, "That's cute Steve, but that doesn't apply to me". And then there are others who might be thinking, "You really didn't just sing to us did you? You are embarrassing yourself, get on with the sermon. What does Mother's day have to with the church anyway? Isn't this just a secular holiday created by Hallmark to sell some cards?"

My response to all of these questions is the same. Even though Mother's day is not an official feast recognized by the church, I believe that the tenets of this holiday are completely compatible with our faith. So this morning, I would like to share my thoughts with you as to why Mother's Day should be celebrated in our churches.

In the narrowest definition, we typically think of a mother as a woman who has given birth to a child. Fortunately, our understanding of mother has been expanded to include women who foster, adopt or care for others. Our definition of mother has also broadened to embrace the many nurturing qualities of women who act as surrogate mothers to a wide range of people and in many different circumstances. The term mother is often used figuratively to describe people or things that exhibit the qualities associated with mothers, – "mother church or mother-land". We even attribute the term mother to non-human things such as – "computer motherboards", or when referring to deposits of minerals – "mother-load", to institutions that spawn other organizations we use the more inclusive term – "parent company", and mother is also used in a derogatory manner when placed in front of a certain expletive slang word.

But it is in the sense of birthing, the giving and nurturing of life that still commands much of our attention. This is truly the one instance in all of humanity that a single person comes as close to creating new life as is possible. I think it is also safe to say that this is probably the only thing that women cannot do alone – they have to have help and input from men. But after that initial assistance, women have to bear the burden of this birthing work, which includes all of the biological, emotional and spiritual changes as well as the physical pain of pregnancy and childbirth. For these reasons, I know that women are the stronger sex!

Webster's dictionary defines mother as "that which gives birth to something, is the origin or source of something". Isn't this the same foundational understanding that we have of God? We believe that God is the source and originator of all life and that it is God who has given birth to the whole of creation! So with this definition is it fair to say that God is the mother of all things? Don't we come together to worship God every week at this our public liturgy? Would it then be a stretch to say that we celebrate God as mother every time we gather?

In addition, a foundational tenet of Christianity is that Jesus became incarnate in a human woman and was birthed just as the rest of us were. The incarnation would not have happened without a woman. Jesus was also dependent upon the care and nurturance of his mother and probably developed his many compassionate, caring qualities because of his mother.

Some of these fundamental motherly characteristics that Jesus exhibited are Wisdom, Understanding and Love. We see these qualities interwoven throughout our scriptures, tradition and faith. Take for example our first reading today from Acts. The Spirit guides Philip to speak with the Ethiopian eunuch and teach him about the scriptures. The eunuch was seeking understanding and when Philip shared the wisdom given him by the Spirit, the eunuch's eyes and heart were opened and he immediately wanted to be baptized in the water.

The entire second lesson we heard today talks about love. Love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God. God loves us and we are called to love ourselves and our neighbors. The word love is used 26 times in this short reading. This centrality of Love is crucial to our Christian faith. Do we not also ascribe great importance to a mother's love?

Another component typically associated with mothers is that of feeding. During pregnancy the mother has been feeding the baby through the umbilical cord but once this is cut the baby still derives its nourishment from the mother's breast. Granted, the manufacture of formula has changed some of the dynamics of feeding which allows men to participate, but the fact remains that only women have the ability to naturally feed their children. How many of us here have encountered mothers or grandmothers that keep putting food in front of us saying, Eat, Eat!

We see throughout the Gospels that Jesus was heavily involved with feeding people as part of his ministry. The numerous food miracles as well as the numerous stories of Jesus sharing a meal and eating with sinners and tax collectors, highlights the importance of sustaining people with the food they need to survive. Another core tradition and practice of Christianity that picks up on this fact is our celebration of the Eucharist. This ritual that we attend every week right here is also known as the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion. Irregardless of the name we use to describe this act, we believe that the bread and the wine are the body and blood of Christ, the heavenly food that sustains and nurtures us on this journey. By sharing in this meal, we become one with Christ and each

other. In this core belief of our faith, Jesus becomes the surrogate mother who feeds and nurtures us.

Many more examples could be given as to how Jesus embodies the many qualities and characteristics we usually associate with mothers. The bottom line, however, seems to be that our celebration of Mother's Day is not only compatible but integral to our Christian faith and identity.

The problem of course, has been that Christianity was "born" in a patriarchal society, so we inherited male language, models, imagery and leadership that survived throughout the centuries to our present times. And the struggle to fully recognize, honor and integrate women, mothers and all those qualities typically associated with them into our society continues. It is impossible, however, for our sexist faith tradition and culture to totally eliminate or exclude women and mothers. So, one day a year is set aside to recognize their contributions and then business goes on as usual for the next 364 days until we repeat the acknowledgement.

What would happen if we challenged this pattern and celebrated the interconnectedness of our faith with all that is represented by mothers and motherhood every time we came to church? Would your personal faith be different? Would our communal activity take on new meaning?

We have been talking about many facets of mothering but there is yet another important element that needs to be addressed. This final piece is the art of "letting go". Sending forth our children into the world is both joyful and sad, yet it is an important action that all mothers must face.

Today, we come to this very juncture. All of you here at St. John's have nurtured, taught, supported and sustained me over the past two and a half years. In short, every one of you has been a surrogate mother to me in one way or another. Yes, even if you have only sat in your pew and listened to me, you have performed a critical motherly function – listening attentively if you don't believe a word I say!

This is my last service here at St. John's. I am graduating from the Episcopal Divinity School this coming Thursday and I will be at my daughter's graduation next Sunday at Smith College. We will be moving back to Ohio where I will begin my new ministry in Athens on August 1st. I will serve half time as assistant rector at a parish and half time as a college chaplain at Ohio University. My ordination to the priesthood is scheduled for Saturday, June 20th in Cincinnati and I will be working at our General Convention in Anaheim, CA during July.

I hope it is evident by now that you all have done a terrific job in raising me up for this new life. You welcomed a new seminarian into your midst and have now given birth to an Episcopal priest. I am thankful for your assistance, tutelage and friendship. It has truly been a wonderful experience for me here at St. John's and I will miss my time among you! I will take many fond memories with me as well as the lessons that I have learned.

My hope and prayer is that you will continue to embrace students, seminarians and interns here as I believe this is a vital ministry of “mothering” that you provide.

In closing, I wish you all a Happy Mother’s Day!

Amen.