

I'm enjoying Elmira and its history - on Thursday, some of us saw *300 Miles to Freedom* about John Jones. It just made me feel warm all over to see that a man could experience racism and viciousness everywhere he was - *until* he got to Elmira, where he found opportunity and welcome. He was cared for, he flourished, he then cared for others, the world became a kinder, gentler place. Bravo, John Jones. Bravo, Elmira!

Then, of course, there's Thomas J. Beecher and the Eastmans - reading their sermons, drinking deeply of their wisdom and courage - and the hospitality they experienced here. I'm not sure they would have been as welcome, or as effective, elsewhere.

*Radical welcome or radical hospitality is a key message of the Bible. I keep preaching it - you're getting weary of hearing it - but think about this in the context of what made The Park Church - and Elmira - great. John Jones, Beecher, the Eastmans ...*

And there are some who think that Livy Langdon was the genius behind Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain), in making him feel loved just the way he was - while also making keen suggestions on how to improve both his life and his writing. But it wasn't just Livy - it was the whole Langdon family and the Elmira community. Clemens was a fine humorist and good writer before he married Livy and spent time in Susan Crane's lovely study - but he was a *great* writer and cultural commentator afterwards - arguably the best in America.

Yes, Elmira welcomed Samuel Clemens, and the world became a better place for his message and his genius.

But what does this have to do with Mother's Day - to say nothing of St. Paul and his trip to Macedonia, where he met Lydia, the dealer in purple cloth?

I am sorry to say that Mother's Day has been one so-called holiday that left me cold. I assumed it was an invention of the greeting card companies, and thought it hype ... or worse. It seemed that Mother's Day was the cruelty of the so-called perfect family (whatever that is) inflicted on the less fortunate. For many people, it's a reminder of what's missing in their lives - half of the population (the men) basically feels irrelevant. Of women, consider those who've never married, who've never had children, who have children that have died, who have children that forget to call or to write... the list goes on. My guess is that there are as many people who feel devalued on Mother's Day as there are those who delight in it.

But things are not always what they seem - with life, with Elmira, with Mark Twain, with the Bible, and even with Mother's Day ...

It turns out that Mother's Day was begun as a way of condemning violence and honoring those lost on both sides during the Civil War. Ann Jarvis organized a series of Mothers' Day Work Clubs in West Virginia to improve health and sanitary conditions. The clubs raised money for medicine, hired people to work for families where the mothers suffered from tuberculosis, and inspected bottled milk and food. In 1860, local doctors supported the formation of clubs in other towns.

The Baltimore and Ohio Railroad made Taylor County, where Ms. Jarvis was headquartered, into a strategic site during the Civil War. She urged the local Mothers' Day Work Clubs to declare neutrality and provide relief to both Union and Confederate soldiers. The clubs treated the wounded, fed and clothed soldiers, and managed to preserve peace in a community torn apart by political differences.

Near the end of the war, as tensions increased, Ann Jarvis organized a Mothers' Friendship Day at the courthouse to bring together soldiers and neighbors of all political beliefs. It was a great success despite

predictions of violence, and Mothers' Friendship Day became an annual event for several years.

It was after she had moved to Philadelphia and died in 1905 that her daughter Anna made a push for a national Mother's Day. It was Woodrow Wilson in May 1914 - on the eve of WWI - who signed a Congressional Resolution setting aside the second Sunday in May. So Mother's Day was not inspired by Hallmark or FTD Florists or jewelry stores or fine restaurants - it was inspired by women working for peace. No, things are not always what they seem...

But now you must be really confused. What does Ann Jarvis have to do with Mark Twain and Olivia Langdon (other than they lived at approximately the same time) and what do either of them have to do with Lydia, the dealer in purple cloth - who lived 19 centuries earlier? And what does any of this have to do with the presumed subject of this message, namely "The God-Mother"?

Before I get there, I want to debunk some misunderstandings about the nature of God in the Bible. There's much talk these days about the feminine aspect of God, and much confusion as a result. The problem is both cultural and linguistic. Linguistically, unless the subject is explicitly female, we have until recently used the masculine pronoun to refer to both sexes. Culturally, most of us grew up with the image of God as a powerful - indeed sometimes malicious - man, much like the Greek Zeus and the Roman Jupiter. And there are plenty of examples in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures that honor this larger-than-life warrior concept.

But there are numerous descriptions of God - in both the Old and New Testaments - as a mother hen, a mother eagle, a human mother - giving birth to creation and loving it - and sometimes suffering on account of that love.

Every Jewish scholar that I have read or spoken with has stated, unequivocally, that the God of the Hebrew Bible is both male and female - always both-and, never either-or. They note that there are as many as 72 different names for God, of which five are especially common. They are: Yahweh, Jehovah, Elohim, Eloha (the feminine for Elohim), and El Shaddai. El Shaddai appears 48 times in the Hebrew Bible, for example, Genesis 28:3, where it is translated as: "May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and numerous, that you may become a company of peoples."

Now what is interesting is that, while El Shaddai always appears as "God Almighty" in English, one of the various definitions for Shaddai is "breast." It is God as *El*/who protects, while God as *Shaddai* blesses and nourishes us. So you might want to change the image of God the creator from the militant Zeus-like tyrant to a large-breasted woman with enough milk for all of her children. Or, "May the God with breasts bless you and make you fruitful and numerous, that you may become a company of peoples." So we might want to think of El Shaddai as, hmmm, the *God-mother*, who, like Mary the mother of Jesus, gives us a vision of the feminine face of God.

And then we get to the New Testament. On the one hand, Jesus referred to God as "Abba," which means "father," not "Amma," or mother. And St. Paul - well, common belief paints him as a misogynist of the worst kind, relegating women to the back of the church, wearing hats to hide the beauty of their hair, silenced and scorned.

But things are not always what they seem - with life, with Elmira, with Mark Twain, with Mother's Day, with the nature of God in the Hebrew Bible, and even with Jesus and St. Paul.

Consider the role of women in the Gospels. There is the Samaritan woman at the well, the first person to recognize Jesus as the Messiah. There is Mary Magdalene, Jesus' close friend - many scholars suggest his

wife. Certainly he honors her in a way that is uncommonly gracious and respectful. And my favorite - the Syro-Phoenician or Canaanite woman who, in asking Jesus to share the scraps that fall from the table and come to heal her daughter, successfully challenges Jesus to expand his sense of ministry from the Jews only to all the people of all sexes, races, and religions.

And then there is Paul, the reputed woman hater. Modern archaeological and literary scholarship has proven that many of the negative statements about women attributed to Paul were actually written long after his death - which makes sense when we consider his affection for Lydia ... and Prisca, and Phoebe, and Persis, and Julia, and so many others. Of them, Lydia is probably the most powerful. We know this because she is a *dealer* in purple cloth, and, well, that's a big *deal*. She lives and thrives in Philippi, a large city in northern Greece that sits at the top edge of the Aegean Sea and is a major trade route between Asia and Europe. The reason that we associate purple with kings and popes is because it was extracted from the inside of mollusks and was both rare and expensive.

So, unlike most of Jesus' followers who came from the lower classes, Lydia is in the top strata of society. She owns her business and her house and has family and servants living in her house. She is likely the widow of a successful businessman and has followed in his footsteps. And then she becomes a Christian - unheard of for someone in her social strata. In fact she is the first European convert to Christianity.

And she welcomes Paul and his friends to come stay with her - she offers radical hospitality to Paul in the same way that Abraham did to the three visitors to visited him by the oaks of Mamre. Her hospitality was so genuine that, after being wrongly imprisoned, Paul heads immediately to her house when freed.

So we have Ann Jarvis, Livy Langdon, and Lydia the dealer in purple cloth. We also have Mrs. Smith, the wife of Dr. Nathaniel Smith, who is the

first person who fed and cared for John Jones and his four colleagues when they arrived in Elmira. And what do they have in common with each other?

Well, two weeks ago, we baptized Tristan James (TJ) Chevernic and two people came forward with him and his family: Fel Cadwalader and Blair Jennings, as godfather and godmother, respectively. Historically, godparents were chosen for two reasons; 1) to take care of you if something happens to your biological parents, and 2) to teach you about God.

So I think that these women we've discussed today are like El Shaddai - god in the form of mother - god-mothers - people who nurture and nourish - people who teach others about the all-loving nature of God. And they do this by being agents of radical welcome. Think about it: Lydia showed hospitality to a weird little Jewish man with the strange tale about a new Messiah, Mrs. Smith showed hospitality to the runaway John Jones, Livy Clemens showed hospitality to the outlandish Samuel Clemens, Ann Jarvis showed hospitality to Union *and* Confederate soldiers. Think of a world where we live our godmother nature - where we take of folks whose biological parents are unavailable or challenged. Think of a world where we teach people about God by living our El Shaddai nature, our radical welcome nature. These are the qualities that put Elmira on the map. These are the qualities that create peace. And these are the qualities we honor this Mother's Day.