

## Mother's Day Message: Who Is the Mother?

Among my many misgivings about being in the pulpit today is my general ambiguity about Mother's Day. While motherhood has been a transformative experience in my life, the holiday celebrating it seems a little exclusionary, dedicated as it is to those of us who have brought children into the world one way or another. Should an act of biology generate a field day for florists, restaurants and greeting card companies?

What of the rest of us, like the women in Wendy and Rob's Litany, 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? What of all the men? What sort of sermon could speak to the other gender on this day? What about the children? As a little girl, I once inquired where "Children's Day" fell on the calendar. "Every day is Children's Day," my mother groaned.

But before I threw out the baby with the bathwater, so to speak, Felicity helped me think about mothering in a way that transcends gender, age, and stretch marks. What if we broaden our vision to include those virtues that we associate with the feminine—the birthing of new life, the nurture and protection of the smaller and weaker, the offering of hospitality, and the knitting together of a vibrant community. Then who is the mother?

Today's reading in Isaiah uses the act of birth as a metaphor for the bringing forth of a nation. In December 2010, a man in Tunisia burned himself to death in protest at his treatment by police. What followed was an extraordinary year as pro-democracy rebellions erupted across the Middle East. The "Arab Spring" ushered in new leaders in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, and civil uprisings and protests in a host of other countries. We witnessed the birth pangs of dozens of human rights movements in the nightly news and across the Internet. "The Protestor" became Time Magazine's person of the Year.

Isaiah, too, gives us the image of the consoling breasts of the mother, abundant with milk. Mothers do more than bring life into the world; they sustain it; they nurture and protect the fruits of their creation. Until a few years ago, you might have taken my friend Bonnie Chollet for a typical housewife, mother and teacher, giving her energy to her husband and children at home and in the classroom, smiling, agreeing, avoiding unpleasant scenes, and putting herself last. All that changed when hydrofracking threatened her beloved woodlands and streams and the very face of rural New York State.

My quiet friend became an environmental activist, educating herself on both side of the fracking debate, helping form the coalition of People for a Healthy Environment, making herself heard in town meetings, and at rallies around the county, in Albany and in Washington, D.C. Bonnie is still soft-spoken and unfailingly polite, but she no longer shirks conflict. Her championship of Mother Earth has broadened the definition of mother love.

Compassion is a virtue associated with mothers, but by no means exclusive to them. A few years ago I had a student in my class named Quiana. That girl was a walking barometer of her classmates' moods. She knew who was hurting, who felt shy and excluded, who needed uplifting. And that was often her teacher. Caught up in the busy-ness of the school day, attending to a dozen needs at once, frustrated by the jammed pencil sharpener, I set off Quiana's radar like an erratic 747. She would appear in front of me, blocking my path, halting my headlong rush to the next emergency. "Mrs. Reed," she would say, "you need a hug." And I did. And Quiana delivered—warm, enveloping hugs that restored me to my better self. Quiana's hugs reminded me that my calling goes beyond lesson plans and classroom management. She modeled the humanity and understanding that are other faces of teaching. Quiana was mothering me!

Our New Testament reading introduces us to Lydia, one of the women mentioned by name in a Bible full of male presence. She plays a key role in the emerging Christian community around the Mediterranean.

In the decades following the death of Jesus, groups of believers gathered together in homes. The infant Church was sustained by the hospitality of these communities and by the support these new Christians gave one another. It was a dangerous time to be a Christian. Many had been persecuted and killed for their beliefs. Paul himself, in his old persona as Saul, had been one of the persecutors. Now here he is spreading the gospel of Jesus in Macedonia. But he is a stranger in Philippi until Lydia welcomes him into her home.

Lydia is a businesswoman, a seller of purple cloth. She is likely the member of an egalitarian co-op of women and men who extract dye from plants to make luxurious purple fabric. It's hard and dirty work, but it gives Lydia independence and status. And that is what makes her such a valuable ally to Paul. When Lydia and her house are baptized, when she offers hospitality to Paul and his companions, the early church in Philippi becomes a place for all: women, men, children, strangers and friends, rich and poor.

This is one of the earliest examples of the church embodying the feminine virtue of hospitality and community. For me, “Mother Church” conjures up an image of welcoming arms, embracing the dispossessed as well as the entitled, the marginalized along with the mainstream, the “other” along with our own comfortable and familiar selves.

Park Church has a long tradition of being that kind of welcoming community, starting from its founding in 1846 as a Congregational church that would no longer tolerate slavery. Thirty years later Thomas K. Beecher designed the building we occupy today.

In addition to a sanctuary for worship and a Sunday School for religious education, Beecher’s plans included playrooms, parlors, a lending library, kitchens, and baths. These would be available to anyone who needed a hot meal or a hot soak, books to educate themselves, or a place for social get-togethers. Some consider Park Church the first “institutional” church in America.

How do we mother here at Park Church today? As someone who was away for a while, I appreciated the warm welcome I received every time I showed up in a pew. And I like what I see happening in our church home. As an “open and affirming” congregation, we embrace people of every ethnic origin, race, class, age, ability, gender and sexual orientation. Our community outreach provides food, clothing, and shelter for the less fortunate in our neighborhoods and across the world. We wrestle with questions of our faith in scintillating discussion groups, and foster understanding and fellowship between our non-Christian neighbors and ourselves. We show thought-provoking films and offer forums for debate. We cherish our children and include them in Christian education, worship, music, and service to others. Our ministries are hives of collaborative energy, so much so that we can shoo our pastor off to a well-earned retreat and still put together a Sunday service!

So who is the mother? It is the one who comforts, the one who safeguards the helpless, the one who welcomes the stranger, the one who weaves together community. This radical definition of motherhood may or may not involve biological parenting; it always involves emotional nurturing.

Who is the mother? The mother is the one who, like God, gives birth to hope. May we all be mothers, may we all be agents of new life in one another, may we all give birth to hope. Amen.

Sheila Reed 5/13/12

