

Grasped by the Power of Love

1 John 4:7-21

John 15:1-14

May 14, 2023

Festival of the Christian Home – Mothers' Day

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The second Sunday in May is designated as Mother's Day across the United States, a day set apart by Act of Congress, signed by President Woodrow Wilson in 1914. Mother's Day actually began to be celebrated in various states in the late 1800's and after 1907 through the efforts of a lady named Anne Jarvis, became a designated national holiday. In his first Mother's Day proclamation President Wilson stated that the holiday offered a chance to "publicly express our love and reverence for the mothers of our country."

The Church has gotten into the act as well, designating this Sunday by the liturgical name "Festival of the Christian Home." And who can argue with the importance for Christians of honoring our mothers and lifting up the family as one leg of the essential 3-legged stool for our civilization, the home, the church, and the school. There is really power in the love that is behind this whole notion of mother, and of God coming to us as a mother.

Our Brief Statement of Faith for the Presbyterian Church USA adds this beautiful powerful tender image of God as a mother, complementing the more traditional language, saying,

"In everlasting love, the God of Abraham and Sarah chose a covenant people to bless all families of the earth. Hearing their cry, God delivered the children of Israel from the house of bondage. Loving us still, God makes us heirs with Christ of the covenant. Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child, like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home, God is faithful still."

Too often this day has been sentimentalized, given over simply to schmaltzy Hallmark Cards and maybe lunch with Mom, or at least a phone call. Remember that classic Bear Bryant quote for the telephone company, where he closed saying, "Don't forget to call your momma." And then added spontaneously, "I sure wish I could call mine." Me too – I sure wish I could call mine, there's so much more I want to say to her, and I look back with regrets to times when I did not reach out and express love to her as I should have. So today while it is today – call your mother, reach out to your mother, love your mother, give thanks to God for your mother while you still can. Which brings us to our biblical texts on love – love rolls up like waves on the sand again and again. Love begins with God, ripples down into us then through us to others far and near. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son."

In the First Epistle of John, the Apostle urges,

"Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God."

"In this is love not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins."

“We love because he first loved us.”

In the Gospel of John, during Jesus’ last, long, intimate dinner conversation with the Disciples on the night he institutes his Lord’s Supper, then is betrayed and arrested, he says,

“I am the vine, you are the branches,”

“Abide in me as I abide in you.”

“Abide in my love.”

“Love one another as I have loved you.”

“No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

And of course, Paul in his 13th chapter of 1 Corinthians lyricizes on the power of love. Even with all sorts of spiritual powers, understanding all mysteries and all knowledge, having all faith, yet lacking love we gain nothing. We are nothing. “Faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.”

Friends the greatest power in all the world comes through love. Neither political power nor military might nor legal obligations nor calls to virtue, but love. Love is not trite. Love is mighty. Love is powerful, so powerful that the God of the universe expressed the depth of his love by voluntarily laying his own life down for us all whom he calls “friends,” because he loves us so much, that our sins might be forgiven and we might receive the love God has for us, love descending into us from above, and love overflowing outward from us to others.

The way we learn love comes from God and is sustained through our abiding continuing growing relationship with God. God is portrayed in Scripture as a loving parent. Most frequently, as was common in ancient Middle Eastern cultures, God is portrayed as the Father who loves us. But too, the Bible is full of feminine imagery for God as the Mother who loves us.

Isaiah tells Israel on their return from Exile, “As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.”ⁱ

Hosea, after indicting Israel harshly as a wayward loose woman, turns in chapter 11 to these comforting motherly words of return and restoration.

“When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.

The more I called them the more they went from me;

They kept sacrificing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols.

Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk,

I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them.

I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love,

I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks.

I bent down to them and fed them.”ⁱⁱ

We learn love from God most fully in Jesus, who was both human and divine. And as a human – Jesus learned to love from his mother Mary. As we are given life and nurtured along in

life we experience love first of all from our mother. So, to lift up Mothers' Day, or as the Church has termed it, "The Festival of the Christian Home" is not an act of sentimentality but an act of love, strengthening the cords that bind us together and keep us human, connected to God and one another.

You see the Church understands itself as a family, a large family within which our nuclear families are subsets. Family language of Mothers and Fathers, Sisters and Brothers abounds throughout the New Testament writings of the Early Church and has been maintained through these thousands of years. John Calvin notably calls the Church, "the Mother of all the faithful."

"There is no other way to enter into life unless this mother conceives us in her womb, give us birth, (and) nourish us at her breast... Away from her bosom one cannot hope for any forgiveness of sins or any salvation."ⁱⁱⁱ

We at South Highland have a wonderful anniversary hymn that we sing from time to time,

"See all around you the people of God, gathered for worship, invited to serve.
Never more strangers come from abroad. For there are no strangers in the household of God."

What I am trying to get across to you today friends, is the simple yet profound core truth that God is love and God gives us power to love as we abide in him, as branches to the vine. At the dinner table Jesus expands on just how this works.

I

First Jesus says, "I am the vine you are the branches." The life- giving source that sustains us is Jesus. He is our vine from which we draw life. We are all interconnected with each other through him.

This year I have joined my wife Gayle the beekeeper in partnership. I took the introductory class on beekeeping at the Botanical Gardens. I have been studying the amazing interdependent relationship within a bee colony.

The bees innately sense their roles and are working together to make honey. Worker bees create the queen bee with a special jelly, then the queen bee mates with many drone bees and plants thousands of eggs in the hive. The eggs are nursed and tended by worker bees who feed them. There are even funeral director bees who remove dead bees from the hive. A bee hive is an amazing interactive relationship of mutual support.

Our own families and our church family are intended to work together interactively like this for the good of the whole. All our families need to recognize and reverence our need for Jesus, our trust in Jesus. We parent and grandparents need to extend that love for Jesus in what we say and in what we do with our children and grandchildren.

Parents, it starts with you to model Jesus Christ and Christian living to your children. The church is here to help you. We are not independent, rather we are interdependent. We need each other in ongoing mutuality.

Have you ever seen the mighty California Redwoods in Muir Valley, across the Golden Gate Bridge from San Francisco? They are so tall and stately, so wide that a few have had tunnels cut through their trunks big enough for a car to drive through. But the strength of the Redwoods comes not in their massive height but in their underground interconnected root systems that tie them together one to another. That's what our families and our church family need to offer- a strong root system, interconnected to the vine.

I love the question a child asked the pastor one Sunday after a baptism, "OK, so where's this kid I'm supposed to take care of?"

Parents we cannot contract out Christian formation of our children to others. We cannot expect to grow our children as deep wise followers of Jesus if we do not live out our baptismal promises daily at home.

Likewise, we church cannot neglect our baptismal promises to practically live out our support of these we baptize by providing a school, and a sanctuary, a safe place, and most of all a loving, accepting, embracing community for Christian development. John Calvin continues in his imagery of the Church as Mother, writing,

"I shall start, then, with the church, into whose bosom God is pleased to gather his sons, (and daughters), not only that they may be nourished by her help and ministry as long as they are infants and children, but also that they may be guided by her motherly care until they mature and at last reach the goal of faith... so that, for those to whom he is Father, the church may also be Mother."

II

Second, the way we stay connected, strong and fruitful with Jesus our vine is to abide.

"I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned."

Abide here means to stay connected, to remain in vital relationship, receiving nutrients as fruit from vine. Nutrients in the form of worship, praising in song, hearing Scripture and obeying its teaching, receiving the sacraments and most of all praying. Even though the fruit of a grape is connected to the vine only by a tiny point of contact, that contact point is essential. Separated from the vine, the fruit withers and dies. Likewise, we die apart from our connection to Jesus the vine, and through him to each other- fellow branches.

Think back to the Covid isolation we experienced. At first, we sort of enjoyed staying at home, lingering all day in our pajamas. Some liked worshipping from the couch watching on the screen. But we noticed something was missing, and that was each other. We need to abide with Christ and with each other. As T.S. Eliot wrote,

“What life have you if you have not life together?
There is no life that is not in community.
And no community, not lived in praise of God.”^{iv}

First Jesus is the vine. Second, we must abide in him

III

Third as we abide as branches to the vine, as we stay connected God hears and answers our prayers. Listen to this great promise of Jesus, “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.”^v This does not mean God grants whatever we ask, but God hears us whenever we ask, and answers us as is best for us in accordance with his will.

All of this is the fruit of love at work. God’s love given to and working in us. Our mother’s love embracing us, caring for us, protecting us. So, loved may we love God and one another, and especially our Mothers.

Amen.

ⁱ Isaiah 66:13

ⁱⁱ Hosea 11:1-4

ⁱⁱⁱ John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion

^{iv} T.S. Eliot, “Choruses from the Rock”, 1934

^v John 15:7