One Central Passion

Mother’s Day was first celebrated in a West Virginia Methodist church in 1908. Anna Jarvis conceived of Mother’s Day as a way to honor her deceased mom and pay tribute to the sacrifices mothers make for their children. By 1914, it had become a national holiday. Like other Christian holidays, it wasn’t long before florists and card companies got into the act. It’s ironic that years later Anna Jarvis was arrested for protesting the commercialization of Mother’s Day.

It’s appropriate to honor the sacrifice of mothers since sacrifice is central to Jesus’ message. Yet, there’s also a considerable amount of sentimentalizing this holiday. Mother’s Day is hard for some people. It’s hard for couples who long to be parents. It’s hard for families whose relationships leave something to be desired. It’s hard for mothers and children estranged from each other. It’s hard for people who are mourning the deaths of their deceased mothers. The hype over Mother’s Day pours salt in the wounds of those who are childless, bereaved or estranged. It may explain why some believers stay away from church on Mother’s Day.

Our Scripture lesson numbers Jesus’ mother among his faithful followers who gather in the upper room. The devotion and affection Mary engenders is hardly surprising. While everybody else disappears from Jesus’ side, Mary endures to the end. She is the epitome of mother love.

Women feature prominently in Luke’s gospel. Consider the way Luke begins his gospel—by announcing the coming Messiah to two women, Mary and Elizabeth. They’re the first ones who receive the news of Jesus’ imminent arrival. Their male counterparts, Zechariah and Joseph, are told later.

Women travel with Jesus as full-fledged members of his band of disciples. Luke tells us, in chapter 8, that Jesus travels from town to town with “the twelve…and some of the women (8:1-3).

Women also predominate at the end of Jesus’ life. Let’s just tell it like it is—the women in Jesus’ life stay strong; the men pretty much vaporize. The women are all present and accounted for at Jesus’ crucifixion (Luke 23:49). They attend to Jesus’ burial (23:55). They are the first to witness his

How can I impress upon you how rare it is to feature women in the first century? Their testimony was not admitted in a court of law or anywhere else, for that matter.

Celsus was a second century Greek philosopher and a harsh critic of Christianity. He attacked the four gospels because they were based on a woman’s testimony. He wrote, “After death he rose again and showed the mark of his punishment and how his hands had been pierced. But who saw this—a hysterical woman, as you say, and perhaps some others deluded by the same sorcery.”

Celsus attacks the report of Jesus’ resurrection because it’s based on the testimony of a hysterical woman. The hysterical woman in question is Mary Magdalene. She is often misidentified as a prostitute; actually she’s one from whom Jesus exorcises seven demons. She’s among the first who receive the news that Jesus has risen. She serves as an apostle to the Apostles and the church’s first Christian evangelist. It’s to Mary Magdalene, not Peter, James and John that God first entrusts the news of Christ’s resurrection. The early church sought to ward off the sneers of critics who based their ridicule on the testimony of women.

On Easter, I stated in my sermon that you can’t make this story up. I referenced a British journalist who self-identifies as an atheist. He writes, in his monthly column, that if Jesus had never existed, the church could never have invented him. He argues that the church would have invented someone much more convenient. I wholeheartedly concur!

I identified, in this same sermon, four reasons why you can’t make this story up. Reason number four: the gospel writers would have never put forward women as the first witnesses to Jesus’ resurrection. They would never, ever have imagined women as the first people to whom God entrusts the earth-shattering message that Jesus is alive again.

On this day, when we honor mothers, we acknowledge the role women have played in proclaiming Jesus Christ in word and deed. We give God thanks for mothers who have imparted Jesus’ saving message to the next generation.

Luke writes that the men and women who gather in that upper room are “all joined together constantly devoting themselves to prayer” (Acts 1:14). Together, in the Greek, expresses the sense that they all share in one central passion. This eclectic assortment of people is devoted to a singular passion.
Today’s families are plagued with chronic overscheduling.

Vienna Presbyterian has a comparable mission: Becoming like Christ Together for the World. Becoming like Christ is our central passion. We aspire to become like Christ together. We become like Christ together, not merely for our own sakes, but the sake of others.

We ask you to invest time in helping us to accomplish this mission. We ask you to invest your money, also. This shouldn’t come as any surprise to you. We always invest time and money in things that really matter.

So, what difference does this becoming like Christ mission make to us as moms, dads and children, as men and women of faith?

After staff meeting last week, I asked three women what stands in the way of women fulfilling our becoming like Christ mission. They were unanimous; over-scheduling often gets in the way. Not only have women assumed major financial responsibilities for the family, but they still function as its chief domestic engineer. They’re the ones who routinely shuttle kids to practice and insure food is on the table. What gets squeezed is time for faith formation.

This busy trap is fueled by cultural expectations. We have bought into the myth of supermom. Women are made to feel guilty unless they are shuttling their kids from one skill enhancing activity to the next. Consider what most people post on Facebook. When was the last time someone posted something about laziness? We pride ourselves in being crazy busy.

The UCLA center for families conducted a study of families in the Los Angeles area. They concluded that families are too busy to go into their own backyards. Families rarely eat together even though they claim family meals to be a stated goal. Today’s families are plagued with chronic overscheduling.

What hinders men from our becoming like Christ mission? Several years ago we launched a men’s ministry in this church. We sent an email to men inviting them to a men’s group on Monday night. In the email, I said we will not ask you or make you sing or pray out loud. I can’t tell how many men decided to come because of the words about singing and praying out loud.

You see, men don’t like to do anything that makes them feel awkward and uncomfortable. They like to do comfortable activities like tailgating and supporting the team. When people talk in the church about having a relationship with Jesus Christ, men get nervous. Since they struggle to maintain a relationship with their wives or girlfriends, the thought of establishing a relationship with Christ makes them uncomfortable.

In churches of all denominations, women outnumber
“Don’t waste your life on fatal success.”  
- John Piper

men by a wide margin. One exception is the Eastern Orthodox Church, which attracts men and women in equal numbers. Why do men gravitate to the Eastern Orthodox Church? One woman interviewed a hundred men in the Orthodox Church to find out why. The word most commonly mentioned by these men was “challenging.” The Orthodox Church is serious and demanding. They observe regular fast days and stand for worship. One man said the western church calls men to be nice and passive (think Mr. Rogers) while the Eastern Church calls men to be courageous (think Braveheart). Men want to be challenged. This message appeals to men’s quest for significance.

Gary Thomas provides a question parents can ask their children about what matters to them in his book, Sacred Parenting. What do you think your mommy and daddy feel most passionate about? If your children answer in terms of their achievement or behavior, it could be what they are telling us is what parents care most about is having high-achieving, successful children. If they don’t say anything about faith formation, maybe we need to rethink what we are modeling for them.

The news lately has become increasingly bizarre. Last week, it was the Boston mara-thon bombers. This week, it’s the horrendous story of the kidnapping in Cleveland. What will it be next week? Maybe it’s time we acknowledge that our culture is in a free fall. We can’t rely any longer on an increasingly secular culture to support our Christian values. Maybe it’s time for the American church to become counter-cultural. It requires us to unite around one central passion of becoming like Christ together for the world.

Let’s not waste our lives on trivial pursuits. John Piper writes in his book, Don’t Waste your Life, “As I write this, I am fifty-seven-years-old. As the months go by, I relate to more and more people who are young enough to be my sons and daughters. You may be in that category. I have four sons and a daughter. Few things, if any, fill me with more longing as these months and years than the longing that my children not waste their lives on fatal success.”

Piper concludes with these words: “I plead with you: desire that your life count for something great! Long for your life to have eternal significance. Want this! Don’t coast through life without a passion.”

One central passion: becoming like Christ together for the world!