



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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MAY 14, 2017
THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

A Divine Gift

John 14:1-14, 25-27; I Peter 2:2-10

None of us here today was alive when Mother's Day gained official recognition as a day to honor our mothers, but do you know who contributed to the effort and how the day was originally designed? In 1915 President Woodrow Wilson proclaimed that Mother's Day would become an annual observance. A year earlier, on May 9, 1914, he signed a joint resolution of Congress recommending that the House and Senate, as well as the executive departments, observe Mother's Day. This initiative was the direct result of the influence of Anna Jarvis of Philadelphia who is often given credit for founding the observance. In 1904, she began campaigning for a national day honoring mothers, and in 1907, she asked a church in Grafton, West Virginia, to hold a special service recognizing the second anniversary of her mother's death. She began the practice of wearing a flower and chose the second Sunday in May as Mother's Day.

Frank E. Hering of Indiana also worked for a commemorative day for mothers in 1904. Yet, even his efforts were predated by those of Mary Towles Sassen, a Kentucky schoolteacher, who conducted Mother's Day celebrations beginning in 1887. All of these people wanted to honor the place that mothers hold in our lives, and they each designed celebrations that would acknowledge all that mothers are and do for us. Yet, none of these persons was the first to call for a special day for mothers, however, nor was their emphasis the original design for Mother's Day.

We know Julia Ward Howe more for what she did than for who she was. Mrs. Howe, who was born in New York City in 1819, wrote *"The Battle Hymn of the Republic"* following a visit to a Union Army camp in 1861. She was a tireless lady who worked as a suffragette and reformer. She also acted as an advocate for persons who were disabled, who suffered from mental illness, and who were imprisoned. She was a poet and an author.

Following the Civil War here in our country and the Franco-Prussian War in Europe, Julia Ward Howe was disturbed by the devastation she witnessed. The slaughter of so many men, the divisions that tore families apart, the cities, towns, and homes that were destroyed, the property that was

stolen, the pride that was crushed, and the national spirit that was decimated affected her deeply. On June 2, 1872, she held the first festival for Mother's Day. It was a quite different occasion than we now observe.

Julia Ward Howe had written a poem titled, *Appeal to Womanhood Throughout the World*" in September 1870. In that poem she described the kind of day that should be set aside for women. Rather than a day honoring mothers, Mrs. Howe called for a day when mothers would stand to be recognized. Instead of a day lavishing Mother with platitudes, she envisioned a day when mothers would rise, demanding to be heard. Rather than a day for Mother to sit back and relax, she called for a day in which mothers would march, mobilize, and move throughout this country and the world. Julia Ward Howe wanted her festival for mothers to "be devoted to the advocacy of peace."

It was a bold call that she issued to mothers everywhere. She wanted them to work against the policies and practices that led to injustice and war. She wrote,

We women of one country will be too tender
of those of another country to allow
our sons to be trained to injure theirs.

and

Why do not the mothers of mankind interfere in these matters, to
prevent the waste of human life which they alone bear and know
the cost?

The invitation for her final festival, which took place in 1912, stated that

this festival . . . is a time for women and children to come
together; to . . . speak, sing and pray for "those things that make
for peace.

Julia Ward Howe's vision was that human brotherhood ought to be taught from the cradle onwards, to the sweetest child and the most horrible despot. She believed that the kinship of humanity ought to be the basis of education and legislation alike.¹

¹Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America, *Brochure on Mother's Day*, (Spring 1997), with acknowledgments to material from the Women's Action for Nuclear Disarmament Education Fund.

What if mothers worldwide had accepted this calling back in 1872? What if such festivals had not ceased in 1912? What if every mother in the world had embraced this concept of teaching peace, of fostering goodwill toward all people, of teaching patience and modeling tolerance, of showing perseverance and engendering faith? What if every mother of every child born since 1872 had learned peace instead of war, what difference would it have made in our world?

Would it have decreased the number of fights on the playground or brawls on the athletic field? Would it have reduced the number of petty squabbles and gossipy arguments? Could such a practice have circumvented battles among businesses, fights over property rights, coups against ruling governments, aggression against other nations, the abuse and mistreatment of other people, even the horror of war? Would there have been a First or Second World War if every child had learned peace at her mother's knee and on his mother's hip? Would the Korean Conflict, the Vietnam War, the Gulf Wars, the battles in Lebanon, Israel, Iraq, Afghanistan, Egypt, and Syria, the fighting in Bosnia, the conflicts in Africa, the unrest in South America, 9/11 and all of the acts of terrorism that keep us on edge — would these conflicts that pit human against human ever have happened if we all learned peace at an early age?

Was Mrs. Howe's vision simply a wild dream and a vain hope? Some of us might think so, but what mother has not hoped that her child would grow up to be peace-loving? It may seem absolutely absurd to think that the history of humanity could have been completely changed if mothers everywhere had taught from the same page, a page containing but one word: "PEACE."

It may seem absurd on a large scale, but what about in individual lives? How many mothers here today *have* taught their children the ways of peace and justice and proudly witnessed them live out those realities? How many of you were taught to seek peace in everything thing that you do? Many of you were for I see how you live and I know your hearts. You have learned peace and you live it! If peace works one person at a time, then it can work one person at a time until the whole world knows peace.

Some of you remember the sitcom "Frazier" which aired a few years ago. In one episode, Frazier, a radio psychologist, installed a Japanese doorknocker on the door of his condominium. He promptly received a note of reprimand from the president of the homeowners association in his building telling him that the doorknocker violated the building rule against decorating

the hallways. Frazier decided he would take his case to the next meeting of the association and convince them that his doorknocker was not tacky, but actually benefitted the hallway outside his door. If you ever watched the program, you know that this character, played so well by Kelsey Grammar, had a way of saying things that went far beyond what most regular folks expected of a simple explanation. He addressed the association meeting by admitting that he knew there was a rule against decorating individual doors and that generally it was a good rule. Passing out pictures of the doorknocker in question, he described why it should be an exception to the rule. He said,

Imagine someone walking down the hallway who sees this doorknocker. It might just brighten their day. They might smile at someone they pass along the street who, in turn, might be lifted in spirits and pick up a piece of trash from the sidewalk. Someone noticing that good deed might be encouraged toward an act of benevolence to someone in need. On and on the goodness could spread until people are treating each other with kindness instead of anger. Why, who knows how it might effect world peace!

I don't know whether door knockers of any kind could have an effect on world peace, and Frazier Crane certainly was not the model for a life of serenity and peacefulness. Yet, Frazier's idea of how something that seems so insignificant can have a positive effect is right on target. It is often the little things that we do that make a large difference in our lives. If every mother—and father—took responsibility for her or his children and taught them peace, justice, and brotherhood, imagine what a difference it would make in the lives of those children—and of the world!

What Julia Ward Howe called for is no more ambitious, perhaps even less so, than what Jesus promised his disciples just before his crucifixion. At the last supper, as he prepared them for his death and resurrection, Jesus told them he would be with them and then said, "Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you." And following his resurrection, at each appearance, he greeted his followers by saying, "Peace be to you." It is in keeping with the character of Christ to offer the blessing of peace. Yet, his words were not merely a polite greeting. Not only did he want to calm the fearful spirits of his followers, but he also longed for them a sense of serenity and completeness in life. The blessing of peace means wholeness. It suggests one who has fully integrated her life and is not at odds with God, self, or other people. Jesus desired this kind of peace for all of his followers, ourselves included.

He wanted there to be no enmity between us and God or among ourselves. Jesus wanted us to be at peace with God, with one another, and with ourselves. Julia Ward Howe, following Jesus, called on the women of the world to be advocates for such peace so that we all might learn to live in peace.

As it has evolved, however, Mother's Day has become an occasion to honor our mothers and to give them special gifts that bespeak our love for them. It is and should be a day to thank and pamper the person who brought us into this world and who has shaped who we are in so many ways. In that spirit, we ought to shift the full responsibility for teaching peace from our mothers and instead witness to their influence in our lives by living peacefully with one another. What if all of the children of the world followed their mothers' advice and lived peacefully together? What if you and I decided to encourage rather than compete ruthlessly with one another? What if we decided to turn the other cheek from time to time, listened instead of talking, and sought forgiveness rather than retaliation? What if we began to think that the person who just cut us off in traffic, the adversary on the other side of the conference table, or the enemy on the other end of a gun is some mother's child just as we are? What if we realized how much our actions and attitudes could hurt that mother and dishonor our own mother? What if we decided to honor our mothers by living the life they taught us and the ways they shaped us?

A number of years ago I preached a sermon on the three worst words you could ever say. It was based on a childhood conversation I had with my mother as we were riding in the car on the way to visit relatives. I don't remember the topic or the problem I was complaining about, but at some point I said, "I don't care." My mother turned to me and said, "Those are the worst words you can ever say. To not care is to give up all hope of something ever improving." I have remembered those words through the years. If I am ever tempted to comment on a situation by saying, "I don't care," I realize that it is the worst attitude I could possibly have.

To observe some of the conflicts that exist in our own lives, among friends, and throughout the world and to conclude that we do not care what happens is to reject the very gift of life Jesus offered to us. Peace is not always easily achieved. In fact, it often comes at a great cost. For Jesus it certainly did. Nevertheless, before he died and after his resurrection, he offered us all the divine gift of peace—of wholeness. To care what happens to us, to our family and friends, to our community, and to our world means that

we have to give of ourselves so that we all might live in peace. Jesus died for it and came back to life to offer it to us.

Peace is a divine gift and Julia Ward Howe recognized that it is best handled by special people, so she called on the women of the world to use their energy and influence and love to promote peace. Mother's Day is a fine occasion to accept that calling. And, because our mothers are themselves a divine gift, this day is a good day to begin living up to their expectations and offering the gift of peace to the people around us. Mrs. Howe knew that a mother's love just might help change the world. Ask Mary, the mother of Jesus, if a mother's love makes a difference. Ask your own mother or, better yet, show her how the difference her love and care have made in your life. You will feel empowered, she will be honored, and we will all be the better for it. Thanks be to God for the divine gift of peace and for the divine gift of our mothers. Amen.

Let us pray:

For those who have given us life and brought us into this world, we thank you, O God. For the gift of peace that you offer to us, we thank you as well. Help us to receive this powerful gift, to recognize its importance in our world today, and its relevance in our lives. Help us to live in peace with you, with one another, and with ourselves, through Jesus the Christ, our true Peace. Amen.

May 14, 2017

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Thinking of you, O Christ, does bring us joy and comfort and hope. How grateful we are for the gift of life you have given to us. How thankful we are for the salvation which we enjoy. As we think of you, we offer our gratitude for every good gift that comes our way through the generosity of your holy love.

We also thank you, O God, for the gift of our mothers. While it is they who brought us into this world, we realize that we are unique because of their loving care. We thank you for lessons they taught us, for guidance they offered us, and for the example of faithful living which they provided to us.

We celebrate our mothers who are still with us and who continue to love us with unconditional affection. We remember our mothers who now dwell with you in that realm of light and peace. May their memory continue to inspire and guide us as we seek to honor all that they have done for us. We pray for mothers who have experienced the deep pain of losing children and for those who cope with circumstances that are beyond their control but not their compassion. We pray for mothers who raise grandchildren, for those who are an example for another's children, and the mothers who cope with their own sense of loss and uncertainty.

We also pray for those of us whose mothers were not able to be what you had hoped for them. Where forgiveness is needed, grant it. Where healing is desired, provide it. Where reconciliation could bring a new day for all, we pray for it. Hold our mothers closely in your care and continue to deliver your grace through them, we pray.

We have other requests and needs that are known to you, O God, and we ask that your heart be open to all of our prayers. Work within and among us to continue to redeem this world and to transform it into the home that will be safe and nurturing for all of your children. Bless us with your peace, we pray, which is ours through the death and resurrection of our brother and Savior, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.