

## Sermon Preached on Seventh Sunday of Easter

(May 8, 2016)

### "A Tale of Two Mothers"

Happy Mother's Day! I hope you're having a great day. Got flowers? Cards? Did you think of your mother? Give thanks to God for her? Good. In honor of the occasion, I would like to tell you a tale of two mothers who were major influences in the creation of Mother's Day.

And how none of this is what they had in mind.

You see, back in the mid-19th century, there were these two mothers, Julia Ward Howe from Boston (thou originally from New York) and a mother of six. And Ann Maria Reeves Jarvis from Virginia, a mother of twelve.

Two very different women from crucially different parts of the world but who were each in their own way kind of radical.

The first mother I want to tell you about is Julia Ward Howe. Her husband was a physician and reformer, founder of Perkins School for the blind. Both were abolitionists, but Julia was also a secret author, having published two books of poetry without her husband's knowledge, and written multiple articles for literary magazines. He wasn't too happy when he found out, but she kept writing and publishing, and he finally gave up trying to stop her. She's best known for writing "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" in 1861 after a meeting with Abraham Lincoln. But it was after the Civil War that her role as a mother kicked in. She counted herself lucky that only one of her children died during the war, and that of illness, but she watched as countless other mothers sent their children and husbands into battle. She saw how many did not return, and that those who did return were changed.

Then, the Franco Prussian War hit in Europe, and she decided she'd seen enough. In 1870, she published an "Appeal to Womanhood Throughout the World," which has since become known as the "Mother's Day Proclamation." In it, she wrote, "In this day of progress, in this century of light, the ambition of rulers has been allowed to barter the dear interests of domestic life for the bloody exchanges of the battle field. Thus men have done. Thus men will do. But women need no longer be made a party to proceedings which fill the globe with grief and horror. ... Our husbands shall not come to us, reeking with carnage, for caresses and applause. Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn all that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy and patience. We women of one country, will be too tender of those of another country, to allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs." She followed this up by petitioning the government to declare June 2 "Mother's Day for Peace." Although there were several years of local observance, in the end, the government wasn't interested.

This brings us to our second mother, Ann Maria Reeves Jarvis. She was the wife of a Methodist minister in what is now West Virginia. In the 1850s, she organized Mothers' Day Work Clubs in several towns "to improve health and sanitary conditions." They also raised money to hire help for families beset by tuberculosis, and inspected bottled milk and food for contamination. When the Civil War broke out, her part of the country was right on the border of north and south, so some fought for the Union, some for the Confederacy. Jarvis called on all of the Mothers' Day Work Clubs to declare themselves neutral, "and provide relief to both Union and Confederate soldiers." Throughout the war, the clubs treated the wounded and regularly fed and clothed soldiers of both sides who were stationed in the area. Losing four of her children during the war - all of disease - yet she kept working. Following the war, with soldiers returning from both sides, the tension was palpable. So she organized a Mothers' Friendship Day to inspire reconciliation. To pretty much everyone's surprise, riots did not break out - Mother's Friendship Day worked and became a regular feature in western Virginia for years.

When Ann died in 1905, her daughter Anna began lobbying for a national mother's day celebration. In 1913, Woodrow Wilson official signed the day into law. Of course, the men in congress wanted to celebrate women having children. But to both Ann Reeves Jarvis and Julia Ward Howe, ALL women were mother's, ALL people were their children. Each in her own way understood that women could bring about peace and reconciliation in a way that men in their time were incapable of doing. That's what they had wanted to celebrate - the oneness of us all, the responsibility that we all share for each other. In fact, when florist began making Mother's Day into a business, Ann Jarvis' daughter started protests - sit ins and the like - until she got arrested.

Which brings us to the scriptures. When Paul and his friends got arrested and thrown into prison, they, too, understood the interconnectedness of all people. When the earthquake sprang them from jail, they told the jailer not to harm himself (you see, back then jailers who lost prisoners got killed in unpleasant ways). Rather, they shared the gospel with him, they prayed for him, and in the end, they baptized him as a brother in Christ.

This is in keeping with the gospel. Jesus declares his intention that we all be one, that as he is in the Father, so are we in him, and each of us is one with the other. Is that any different from what Julia Ward Howe and Ann Maria Reeves Jarvis were saying?

Now don't get me wrong, flowers are on order today! But what these mothers wanted was bigger. They wanted nothing less than the love of Christ lived out on earth.

So, when you go out for Mother's Day brunch, think of the examples of these moms who understood we are all one in Christ, brothers and sisters - mothers to us all. Amen.