

Mother is a Verb

John 14: 1 - 14

Rev. Dr. Benjamin J. Broadbent
The Community Church of Sebastopol - United Church of Christ
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I. Ducklings

As you know by now, one of my pandemic practices is to take a daily walk on the path near my house that follows Piner Creek.

One day this past week, I looked down into the creek and saw a mother duck with ducklings.

There were eight of them.

I was impressed.

I am finding it challenging to parent two children, both of whom are active and social and feeling as cooped up as I do.

But at least I don't have eight.

They were pretty cute though, swimming, then popping up on rocks, shaking their downy selves before jumping back into the water.

I watched the momma duck and, maybe I was projecting, but she looked tired.

Those ducklings had a lot of energy.

And did I mention there were 8 of them.

That's some serious work.

When I got home, I looked it up and learned that ducks generally hatch 7-12 ducklings.

I also learned that the survival rate for ducklings is anywhere from 10 - 70 percent.

What looked like an idyllic spring scene, a duck hen and her offspring, was also a picture of the challenge and work and threat involved in motherhood.

II. Sentimentality

I start this way because today is not only the 5th Sunday in the Season of Easter.

It is also Mothers' Day in North America.

And while Mothers' Day can be meaningful and special for some, it can be fraught for others:

for those who have lost their mothers to death or estrangement, for those who have wanted to become mothers but couldn't, and for those who feel an unwelcome cultural pressure to become a mother. The primary challenge for the church on Mothers' Day is that the holiday tends to impose cultural and gendered stereotypes of what it means to be a mother.

Or, as someone once put it, the greatest threat to the church on any given day is not irrelevance but sentimentality.

One way to resist the gravitational pull toward sentimentality on Mothers' Day is to remember its origins.

In 1908, in her home church, Ann Jarvis honored her mother, a peace activist, who had tended wounded soldiers on both sides in the Civil War. When companies picked up on the holiday and began commercializing it, she took legal action to try and stop them.

My colleague, Rev. Pastor Lacey, made me aware of another counter-cultural Mothers' Day practice called the National Bailout.

Drawing attention to the oppressive practice of requiring cash bail for poor black women caught in the legal system, the National Bailout helps these women manage bail debt while advocating to abolish a system which is discriminatory and predatory.

What if the church took its cues from the origin story of Mothers' Day? What if Mothers' Day was about the peace activism of mothers and the courage of women to put their bodies on the line for other people's children?

What if the church encouraged people to honor their own mamas by joining the national bailout for women of color from an oppressive prison system?

It might mean the end of Mothers' Day brunch.

Goodbye hash browns and hello hashtag #freeblackmamas.

III. Exclusion?

With all of its male-centric language, today's Gospel lesson isn't a natural fit for Mothers' Day.

"In my father's house are many rooms," Jesus tells his disciples.

Not only is the language male-centric; it is patriarchal.

I've never felt comfortable with this image of God: a rich and powerful father figure who has many rooms in his mansion.

How could Jesus identify so closely with this father figure when Jesus comes into the world as someone who is neither rich nor powerful in any conventional sense?

And not only that, this paterfamilias has many rooms, but does he have enough for everyone?

The verses we hear today have been used to say "no," there is not enough room for everyone, only for those who believe in and follow Jesus.

"I am the way, the truth, and the life," Jesus says, "No one comes to the father except through me."

It would seem that if there is any good news in this Gospel, it is only good for those who believe in and follow a rich and powerful male who includes all who defer to him and excludes all who do not.

But to read the text this way would be to read it wrongly and out of context.

In context, Jesus is speaking to his disciples in a time of great distress. These verses are part of what is called the farewell dialogue that happens in the upper room, the setting of the Last Supper, shortly after Jesus has washed his disciples' feet.

The cross is looming large.

The disciples are distressed and grieved, worried and anxious.

Is Jesus abandoning us? How will we know what to do next?

Jesus sees their panicked tears and hears the quiver in their voices.

His words to them are pastoral words.

Don't let your hearts be troubled. I'm not abandoning you. I'm going ahead of you prepare a place.

You know the way to the place, because I *am* the way.

The way is your relationship with me, and that relationship does not end when you don't see me anymore.

If anything, it will get stronger.

The intimacy I share with you is the same intimacy I share with the one who sent me.

I know it's hard to believe, but the love I share with you is the same love that God has for you.

If we can hear these verses from John in their pastoral context, we will discover that Jesus is not making a claim about adherents to other religions or to no religion – nothing could be further from his mind.

Instead, Jesus is caring for his disciples by offering them an intimate and embodied love that he describes as a fatherly love.

But Jesus gender-bends his description.

This is not the distant, property-owning, "I love you, but with conditions" father figure.

This is the mothering father God who lays down her life for the world.

IV. Mother is a verb

Elsewhere in the Gospels, Jesus describes himself as a mother hen who cries over Jerusalem while fighting to protect her brood.

In Jesus, mother is a verb.

Her love expresses itself, able to cry out at those who harm while defending those who are vulnerable.

Her love provides for those in need, willing to make sacrifices so her children may thrive.

Her love soothes those whose hearts are troubled.

Her love protects her children, offering her body to deflect the threats of the world and provide them sustenance.

Jesus' mothering love is not an idea, or a concept, or even a feeling.

It can't be sentimentalized, can't be quantified or codified, can't be distilled into a phrase on a greeting card.

In Jesus, God the Father's love becomes a mothering love that can cry and fight at the same time.

If mother is a verb, then we might wish one another Happy Mothering Day, and not just biological mothers, but all who embody Jesus fierce love in the world. Amen.