

“Abiding With Confidence”

John 14:15-21

Sunday, May 14, 2023

The Sixth Sunday after Easter/Mother’s Day

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In the Gospel of John, Jesus’ farewell message to the disciples is spread across three and a half chapters. There is no recorded evidence, but I believe that it is entirely possible that Jesus’ mother, Mary, had probably slipped out of the room during Jesus’ long speech. Had she been there, she would have probably been tapping her watch or clearing her throat loudly to tell her son it was time to stop talking and sit down!

Mom’s have a way of communicating like that. In the list of instructions my mom left for her funeral, she had made it clear that the service should not be unduly long. “No sermons!” she wrote with an exclamation point, underlined. As if to say, “Let those who have ears hear.” As a lifelong Presbyterian, mom had sat through nearly 90 years of preaching and apparently believed she had heard it all.

What a difference it might have made if we could have seen or heard from women during this long meal. If only we could have seen the pained, exhausted faces of Mary, Jesus’ mother, or Mary Magdalene, his good friend. If only we could have heard Mary Magdalene say, “Lord, we do not know where you are going, how can we know the way?” Or his mother cry out with Philip, “Show us the father and we will be satisfied!”

Of course, Jesus has interacted with women all through the Gospel of John. He listened as his mother appealed to him to do something when the wedding party ran out of wine. He listened to the story of the woman at the well and heard the grieving cries of Lazarus’ sisters.

It has made me wonder: when Jesus says, “If you love me, you will keep my commandment,” it is not as though it has become a stag party. I do not believe he is only talking with the guys, as if they had retreated to a parlor for brandy and cigars. Megan McKenna, a Catholic theologian, reminds us that in the stories of Jesus, women and children were not often counted, but they were certainly present. McKenna says that the story of the feeding of the 5,000 – which, she adds, did not include women and children, is a story that reminds us that often the ones not counted are the ones with hidden wisdom, hidden powers, hidden truth, hidden hope of the future. The ones who were not counted had the food, the trust to share, the baskets for collecting the leftover, and the need to stay all day.”¹

The women were there, and probably some kids. That is why that as the church grew, it adopted an ancient Roman religious practice of honoring mothers. In early spring,

¹ Megan McKenna, *Not Counting Women and Children* (New York: Orbis Books, 1994, p. 19).

during Lent, the ancient church honored Jesus' mother on the fourth Sunday of Lent. Later on, by the 16th century, Mothering Sunday was celebrated in England as a day devoted not only to Jesus' mother, but to honoring their earthly mothers.²

Contemporary preachers, one has said, approach Mother's Day as delicately as a gardener approaches a trellis of wild roses...ever astounded by the beauty of the flowers, but also equally cognizant of the thorn. One of the pastors I worked for solved this problem by inviting his wife, the mother of their four children, to preach every Mother's Day. I always wondered how he pulled that off because that certainly does not sound like the sort of "gift" I could give to my wife. We cannot miss the beauty of the gift of mothering – no matter who conveys that to us, or how we receive it. But it is also true that on Mother's Day we are aware of the prickly circumstances associated with mothers. We easily forget those for whom mother's day is a time of pain, of grief, of feeling orphaned. I appreciate the wisdom of Jeanne Stevenson Moessner who reminds us that not everyone has had a beautiful experience either as a mother or as a child.³ Moreover, there is the very painful reality of infertility. Scripture is filled with stories of women who wanted to have children and could not: Sarah, in Genesis 11, Rebecca in Genesis 25, Rachel, in Genesis 30; Leah in Genesis 29, the wife of Manoah in Judges 13, Hannah in 1 Samuel, Elizabeth in Luke. We recall the song of Zion in Isaiah 54: "Sing o Barren, one, who did not bear; break forth into singing and cry aloud, you who have not been in travail."

It was a tradition in the church where I grew up to give every woman attending church whose mothers were living a red flower, like the flower I am placing in this vase. Women whose mothers were no longer living were given a white flower. I well remember the year my mother reached for the white flower instead of a red one, holding back tears as she embraced the experience of being orphaned in that sense.

For those for whom Mother's Day has not been a rose garden, Jesus' reference to being "orphaned," abandoned, left alone, may resonate deep within our hearts.

What if we used, as Jeanne Moessner suggests, pink roses to recognize the women who have not been given the gift of bearing children? Perhaps, she suggests, we might use pink flowers for the women who have never born children, for those who are struggling with infertility, for women waiting for adoption, for women whose dreams of raising a family never materialized? What do we offer those who have lost children through stillbirth, miscarriage, SIDS, accident, injury or illness. Or to those who have been mothers to us, regardless of their gender, who have been spiritual mentors and models?

What if we used many colors of roses and other flowers as well to honor those who have treasured the stories God has given to them, pondering these stories in their

² See "Mother's Day," <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/worship/churchcalendar/mothers-day/>

³ Jeanne S. Moessner, "The Pink Rose," *The Journal for Preachers*, Easter, 1998, Vol. XXI, no. 3, pp. 30-32.

hearts just as Mary pondered the stories of Jesus? What would happen if, as a church, we remembered the weeping of Rachel for her children, along with the weeping of all mothers whose children have died?

I found my place with other men in the card aisle at Schnucks yesterday. I was surrounded by younger men with children in tow. It was close to dinner time, and you could tell the anxiety of not having a Mother's Day card was brewing inside of them. Beads of sweat were forming on their foreheads. I said to them, "Welcome to the aisle of shame and guilt!" But what if the church, so deeply aware of its mission to share the new life of Christ, stood among all those in our world who are searching? What if we stood not only with those men searching for a Mother's Day card, but with the thousands and thousands whose lives feel disconnected, filled with anxiety and guilt?

What would it mean for us to obey Jesus by keeping his commandments? In John's gospel, Jesus makes it clear that there is only one commandment: to love as we have been loved. John's gospel is a profoundly relational gospel. To abide with God means that we abide in God's love – and abide with each other. "This is my commandment, that you 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.

Our vision for a life of resurrection in the church begins as we lean into the promise Jesus offers: "I will not leave you orphaned." It is a promise for both mothers and fathers, for those who have children and those who do not have children, at least in the biological manner. It is a promise anchored in the unfailing witness of scripture testifies confidently to a God who nurtures and clothes, sustains, and protect us through acts of love.

What might happen, for example, if we shared some of that extraordinary love we so value about this church with those who have so little? That is what our mission team will be doing in Kentucky this week. And that is what our Mother's Day Gifts are doing today. That is what you do each time you offer yourself in love to Christ.

Tom Long tells the story of watching a man carrying his wife across a threshold. He was driving down the street when he caught a glimpse of this homecoming. He imagined they were newlyweds, straight from the honeymoon, coming home for the first time, the man carrying his bride over the threshold of a new beginning. But then the traffic stopped, and Tom caught a longer glimpse. This was not a couple of newlyweds. He saw the gray hairs on their heads, and then spotted a wheelchair parked outside the front step. This was not a first step across the threshold, an easy transition into a new life. It was, perhaps, the thousandth hard step, emboldened by grace, held in love.

I know that sometimes John's words and images seem dense. At times they are hard to understand. It is helpful to realize that the original audience would have been those whose faith in Jesus had driven a wedge between them and those they had loved. They were those forced out of community, vulnerable and scared, abused and beaten. Like us, they knew the power of Easter, and in hearing this story of Jesus' continuing

presence, they discover anew what we all hope for: the power of God's love extends beyond Easter.

"I will not leave you orphaned," might also be a way of saying, "Wherever you go a church lady is watching you!" But we know that first as a promise of love rather than a reminder to behave.

"I will not leave you orphaned," Jesus reminds us. That is good news – to the men at Walgreens rushing to buy a card, to the thousands of foster children looking for a home, to the women in our lives who have given so much. Amen.