

Sermon for Easter V(B)
May 16, 2006
Christ Church, Andover
The Rev. Jeffrey Gill

Acts 8:26-40; Psalm 66:1-8; I John 3:18-24; John 14:15-21

“I will not leave you orphaned,” Jesus says in his final discourse to a group of disciples, much like children, who were concerned about his departure.

And then from the first epistle of John: “Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.”

Both of these passages conjure up the image of a nurturing parent, and perhaps especially (on this Mother’s Day) the image of a mother, concerned about the care and nurture of her children.

The words from the epistle especially remind me of a passage from Robert Fulghum’s well-known book, *All I really need to know, I learned in Kindergarten*.

All I really need to know about how to live and what to do and how to be, I learned in kindergarten. Wisdom was not at the top of the graduate-school mountain, but there in the sandpile at Sunday School. These are the things I learned:

Share everything. Play fair. Don’t hit people. Put things back where you found them. Clean up your own mess. Don’t take things that aren’t yours. Say you’re sorry when you hurt somebody. Wash your hands before you eat. Flush. Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you. Take a nap every afternoon...

Think what a better world it would be if we all – the whole world – had cookies and milk about 3 o’clock every afternoon and then lay down with our blankies for a nap. Or, if all governments had as a basic policy to always put things back where they found them and to clean up their own mess. And it is still true, no matter how old you are – when you go out into the world, it is best to hold hands and stick together.¹

All the things our kindergarten teachers – and our mothers – taught us! And how quickly we unlearn so much of it!

I have ordinarily shied away from making much of a fuss in church about Mother’s Day or other such secular feast days. It’s partly, I’ll confess, a kind of snobbish anti-Hallmarkism, a basic cynicism about the commercialization of holidays secular or religious. In fact, I have at times even repeated something I now know to be false – that Hallmark *created* Mother’s Day. That, it turns out, is not true, even if they have profited greatly from it.

¹ Robert Fulghum, *All I really Need to Know I learned In Kindergarten*, Villard Books N.Y. 1988, pp. 6-8

There's actually a very long tradition of Mother's Days. The ancient Greeks and Romans celebrated days dedicated to Rhea, the mother of the gods, and Cybele, a mother goddess. In the British Isles and Celtic Europe, the goddess Brigid, and later after the introduction of Christianity her successor St. Brigid, were honored with a spring Mother's Day, connected with the first milk of the ewes. And beginning in the 17th century, Mothering Sunday was celebrated on the Fourth Sunday of Lent in England, a tradition that was lost in the 19th century and then revived after World War II, when Americans brought it back to Britain.

Mother's Day was originally started in the US after the Civil War, as a protest to the carnage of that war, by women who had lost their sons. Perhaps the most famous of those responsible for the establishment of Mother's Day in our country was Julia Ward Howe. She is the author of the words to the Battle Hymn of the Republic, and a social activist who worked for women's rights. She was horrified by the carnage of the Civil War, and in her Mother's Day Proclamation of 1870 wrote these words:

Arise, then, women of this day! Arise all women who have hearts, whether our baptism be that of water or of fears!

Say firmly: "We will not have great questions decided by irrelevant agencies. 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. From the bosom of the devastated earth a voice goes up with our own. It says "Disarm, Disarm! The sword of murder is not the balance of justice."

Blood does not wipe our dishonor nor violence indicate possession. As men have often forsaken the plow and the anvil at the summons of war, let women now leave all that may be left of home for a great and earnest day of counsel. Let them meet first, as women, to bewail and commemorate the dead.

Let them then solemnly take counsel with each other as to the means whereby the great human family can live in peace, each bearing after their own time the sacred impress, not of Caesar, but of God.

In the name of womanhood and of humanity, I earnestly ask that a general congress of women without limit of nationality may be appointed and held at some place deemed most convenient and at the earliest period consistent with its objects, to promote the alliance of the different nationalities, the amicable settlement of international questions, the great and general interests of peace.² [end of proclamation]

² http://womenshistory.about.com/od/howejwriting/a/mothers_day.htm

I can't help but think of how relevant her words are for us today 136 years later. I think of mothers like Cindy Sheehan who have tried against terrible odds to make the same point in our present situation.

One of the most inspiring things I have read recently was a story in the Boston Globe this past Friday. It was a very moving and inspiring Mother's Day story. It was about two young women, one from Wellesley and one from Needham, both of whose husbands were killed on September 11th. Susan Retick and Patti Quigley were both pregnant when the hijacked plane their husbands were on crashed into the World Trade Center, one of them with her second child and the other with her third. They had never met each other at that time. But both of them later saw a program on the situation of Afghan women, many of whose husbands had been killed in decades of war. They realized that even while they were getting lots of financial support and insurance settlements, their counterparts in Afghanistan had nothing. They decided to put some of what they had received to work to help fellow widows – fellow mothers with children – far away. Putting money toward basic services and the establishment of micro-enterprises, they are helping to build bridges based on their shared experience of loss, and their mutual abhorrence of the violence that has taken those they love. The nationality doesn't matter. The shared human experience is all that does.

The first epistle of John said it: "Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action."

Mothers, you have taught us, but we have forgotten. "Share... Play fair. Don't hit people. Put things back where you found them. Clean up your own mess. Don't take things that aren't yours. Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody." You have so much more to teach us. And we need so very much to hear what you have to say.

Jesus said to the disciples, "I will not leave you orphaned." He promised the Holy Spirit who would lead us and guide us into all truth. God give us the ears to hear, the hearts to receive, and will to do what the Spirit teaches us.