

**“The Peace We Do Not Want or Need”**

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

9 May 2021

Rev. Paulo Gustavo França

Texts: Numbers 6:22-26

Luke 24:36-43

*“While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them,  
‘Peace be with you.’”*

- Luke 24:36

**Prayer**

**God of compassion and love,  
Reach out to us like a loving Mother,  
And hold us closer to your nurturing presence  
As we listen to your Word for us this morning.  
In and through Christ, we make this prayer. Amen.**

It is no small challenge for a preacher to stand at the pulpit on the second Sunday of May. When I was a newly ordained minister eager to lead my own congregation, my mentor, the late Rev. John Cairns, gave me a simple and very direct word of advice about Mother’s Day – it is one of the most controversial non-liturgical celebrations in the life of the church. Pastors critique it, ignore it or fully embrace it at their own peril.

The problem with Mother’s Day is that everyone has an opinion about it and, whether or not, it belongs in the pulpit or should be left in the good hands of florists, local restaurateurs and the greeting card industry! Anne Lamott published a post on her Facebook page last Friday expressing her own personal dislike of this Sunday in May. She revealed that she did not raise her son to celebrate Mother’s Day because she believes the holiday perpetuates the dangerous idea that mothers are automatically more loving, more fulfilled and complete, and better equipped to raise children than non-mothers. With her typical stark candor, Lamott points out the problematic nature of the holiday for non-mothers, the mothers of dead or estranged children, for children of mothers who were not able to be a nurturing presence in their lives and for children whose mothers are gone. She imagines all these people sitting uncomfortably in their churches on Mother’s Day pretending to feel good about a holiday that excludes and hurts them while holding in their hearts the deepest feelings of grief and failure. But her main gripe with Mother’s Day, Lamott confessed, is that it feels incomplete and imprecise. **“The main thing that ever-helped mothers was other people mothering them, including aunts and brothers; a chain of mothering that keeps the whole shebang afloat. I am the woman I grew to be,”** Anne Lamott wrote, **“partly, in spite of my mother, who unconsciously raised me to self-destruct; and partly because of the extraordinary love of her best friends, my own best friends’ mothers, and**

**from surrogates, many of whom were not women at all but gay men. I have loved them my entire life, including my mom, even after their passing.”<sup>1</sup>**

Margaret Renkl, another mother, who is also an author and a contributing Opinion writer for the New York Times, shares Anne Lamott’s uneasy sentiment about Mother’s Day. She questions whether the holiday should be on the calendar at all given the tangle of complicated emotions this day in May brings up for so many people who struggle with hurt feelings and painful memories on Mother’s Day. In a recent Guest Essay she wrote for the Times, Margaret Renkl recognizes that the pandemic will make this Sunday terribly difficult for mothers who lost their children and children who lost their mothers to COVID-19, but she also speaks of the wondrous gift of motherhood that unites mothers with other women, other human beings and with much of the animal kingdom. Even though her youngest child outgrew being a hip baby 20 years ago, Renkl says that she still has to stop herself from reaching out for a crying infant in the checkout line and swears that she feels the urge to protect the bluebird hatchlings in her nest box as deeply as their mother does. Margaret Renkl concluded her essay with a mix of realistic and hopeful words about the second Sunday in May. She wrote, ***“Mother’s Day is a saccharine invention, a national fairy tale in a nation that does almost nothing to support mothers. But it is also a day for contemplating the ways in which we’re connected to one another, through times of joy and times of sorrow, across time and across species.”<sup>2</sup>***

This preacher is not ready to give up on Mother’s Day yet. And it is not just because I love my less-than-perfect mother with every fiber of my being, I do believe that Mother’s Day, even though the wider culture has over-sentimentalized and over-commercialized it, gives the church the unique opportunity to live up to Paul’s sound and wise instructions to the Christians in Rome – ***“Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another...If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”<sup>3</sup>***

This morning, even as we celebrate the gift of motherhood and give thanks for the life and love of our very human and flawed mothers, we also hold in our hearts and in our prayers those for whom this day in May is overshadowed by sadness, disappointment, trauma, grief and even outright anger. My prayer is that God may bless and keep all of you who are hurting or crying today and may grant you the healing peace of Christ throughout this Sunday.

There is another reason that keeps me committed to the celebration of Mother’s Day despite the volatile nature of the holiday and the protests of liturgy purists who rightly point out that this is not an “official” holy day on the liturgical calendar of the Church Universal. On Mother’s Day, the church can amplify relevant theological matters such as the use of inclusive language.

Our Sacred Scriptures, as it would be expected of ancient texts, use mostly masculine words and images to talk about God, but, even though the Bible was written

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in a deeply patriarchal culture, our Scriptures also offer surprisingly feminine and very maternal language to describe our Creator. Julian of Norwich, the Medieval English Christian mystic who spent most of her life in seclusion at St. Julian's Church in the City of Norwich and lived through the bubonic pandemic, drew liberally from the feminine images for God in the Bible and became known as one of the first theologians who used the word "Mother" as a metaphor for God's unconditional and life-saving love. In her celebrated writings, Julian says, "***This fair lovely word "mother" is so sweet and so kind in itself, that it cannot truly be said of anyone nor to anyone except of Him and to Him who is true Mother of life and of all. To the quality of motherhood belongs natural love, wisdom, and knowledge—and this is God.***"<sup>4</sup> And Julian also speaks of Christ as "***our true Mother, where the basis of motherhood begins, with all the sweet protection of love that accompanies it endlessly.***"<sup>5</sup> Then she makes a powerful biblical and theological declaration, "***As truly as God is our Father, so truly God is our Mother.***"<sup>6</sup> By the way, the words for this morning's hymn come from the theology of divine motherhood developed by Julian of Norwich.

This is what I love most about this day. Mother's Day not only creates a sacred space in our worship service where we can reflect on the theology of divine motherhood, but the second Sunday in May also invites us to think seriously about how this picture of God as the selfless, loving Mother makes all of us more sensitive and more willing to listen and pay attention to the issues that are important to women and mothers in our families, in our congregation, in our nation and in the world.

I have to confess that I was somewhat surprised last week when I started reading blogs written mostly by young mothers to help me prepare for today's sermon. Almost every one of the mommy bloggers said that the item near the top of their Mother's Day wish list is not flowers or chocolate and not even diamonds, a girl's best friend. No, the item near the top of these mothers' wish list is to enjoy at least some uninterrupted, rejuvenating, quiet, relaxing, and peaceful time alone today. I am obviously aware of how the pandemic has been tough on parents. I know that families had to shift into high gear and engage in even more intensive parenting while classes were virtual and children were sheltering at home. What I had not taken into consideration is how our society and culture still expect mothers to shoulder most of the parenting responsibilities without much help from policymakers and, oftentimes, from their spouses and partners. As Anne Lamott said, "***no one is more sentimentalized in America than mothers on Mother's Day,***"<sup>7</sup> and it is precisely this idealized vision of motherhood that sets up and perpetuates the unrealistic expectations placed on all mothers.

As Christians, we all should be alarmed that over the last 14 months a growing number of mothers had to quit their jobs and give up their professional dreams at four times the rate of men<sup>8</sup> to become a full-time parent because this is what our culture and the church expect from a good and loving mother. The pay gap in our country, which relegates women to lower paid positions and normalizes the practice of paying mothers much less than their male counterparts in the same jobs, makes the question about who should quit and stay home completely unnecessary. Mostly mothers have stayed home

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to do the heavy-lifting job of being not just mother, but also the teaching assistant, mental health counselor, director of extra-curricular activities, disciplinarian and playmate on top of cleaning and cooking. A research from the American Psychological Association shows that 63% of parents say that they lost emotional support during the pandemic,<sup>9</sup> but 90 % of mothers said that they are more tired, anxious, nervous and exhausted.<sup>10</sup>

Jessica McCrory Calarco, an associate professor of sociology at Indiana University who has been studying the impact of the pandemic on mothers says that it is time to end “***the glorification of motherhood***” in American culture. And she made a good point about what we all should be thinking on this Mother’s Day, “***Yes, give moms [time] off, great, but also having a day when we lay all this praise on moms lets us get away with ... treating women as a safety net rather than giving women the actual social safety net that [women] need.***”<sup>11</sup>

It is not feminist resentment that led Margaret Renkl to define Mother’s Day as “***a national fairy tale in a nation that does almost nothing to support mothers.***” American mothers need and deserve federal policies that provide the safety net that empowers women and can make American families healthier, happier and more whole. As people of faith who worship the God who loves us like a Mother and follow the Christ that gave birth to the Church, we need to be concerned about whether or not mothers in our congregation, in our community and in our country have paid family leave and access to affordable and high-quality childcare. It is not enough to make a big deal of a holiday that celebrates motherhood and speak about our love for our mothers in mawkishly sentimental tones, as faithful Christians, we need to ask ourselves if our society gives mothers the peace of mind they need to thrive both as human beings and as parents. We have to take a stand on the side of mothers who need and deserve fair work schedules, equal pay and opportunities to pursue their professional goals and reach for their own dreams.

We also have to keep in mind that mothering, as Anne Lamott said so eloquently, is not a solo human activity. Research after research shows that mothers are happier and healthier when they are not doing the mothering all by themselves. Having a supportive spouse or partner, friends, an extended family, relatives, and a faith community significantly improve a mother’s wellbeing. In fact, David Brooks wrote an excellent article for The Atlantic in which he says that the invention of the nuclear family – the married couple and children - in American culture has been a mistake.<sup>12</sup> The pandemic made it patently clear that it takes more than two parents to raise a child. Since the 1960’s, Americans have moved away from interconnected and extended families to smaller, detached and more self-sustaining nuclear families. The pressure to make this family arrangement work has been building up as couples devote more time preparing their children to succeed in a highly competitive world while working longer hours and managing challenging schedules at home and at work. An increasing number of mothers have sacrificed friendships and volunteering in their faith communities to keep up with the relentless demands of the nuclear family. Affluent families in suburbs

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like Acton have replaced the loving and caring presence of aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents and close friends with professional childcare, the local school system, sports, tutoring, expensive after-school programs, therapists and even life coaches. But as parents have withdrawn from their extended families and friends and communities of faith that can ground them spiritually and offer an intergenerational network of care, attentiveness, wisdom, prayers, and love, life has become more stressful and less peaceful, especially for mothers. It is no surprise that so many young mothers would like to have Mother's Day off and alone. Mothering requires the effort, energy, time, patience, skills, faith, and loving presence of many other people besides mothers.

The last 14 months have been difficult, challenging, painful for some of us, and exhausting for everyone, but especially for mothers. With the rising rates of vaccination and the decline in community transmission and hospitalizations, the summer is beginning to promise a time of respite for families. We are all looking forward to the opportunity to travel, to get away for a few days, and to begin to enjoy life more freely and more fully once again. The question that I have on this Mother's Day is whether, you, mothers still want to maintain our culture's over-sentimentalized view of motherhood. I wonder if the mothers in our congregation have stopped to ask whether the idolized American ideal of the nuclear family in which mothers take on most of the work of raising the children with limited support from spouses and extended family makes you happy and brings you peace. I wonder if you feel like Margaret Renkl that our society and policymakers do almost nothing to support you and I wonder how our church can stand with you, support you and work with you so mothers in America can have the safety net and the quality of life they need and deserve.

Many of you may be wondering by now how on earth any of this talk about social policies and extended families and mothering has anything to do with the Scripture lesson from Luke that I read this morning. Well, I believe that when the Risen Christ appeared to his fearful disciples, huddled together behind locked doors, talking with Cleopas and his companion about what they experienced on the road to Emmaus, Christ intentionally greeted them with a greeting they had heard hundreds of times before, "**Peace be with you.**" The followers of Jesus were startled and terrified. A few of them had already caught a glimpse of the Risen Christ earlier on Easter Sunday, but now he is standing right before their eyes. They can see his scarred hands, wounded feet and pierced side. They are confused and afraid to believe in their own eyes. The resurrection was still something they had a hard time understanding and believing, but it is the greeting, which they had heard many times before, that puzzled them. After experiencing the pain of betrayal, the horror of Good Friday, the violence of the Roman cross, the loneliness of the tomb, the first word the Risen Christ shares with them is "peace" or "shalom" in Hebrew.

The disciples knew well the meaning of "shalom." They knew that shalom means completeness that is physical, psychological, spiritual, economic, political and ecological. Shalom is peace that is profoundly personal but goes beyond the individual because shalom is about relationships. It means peace with God. Peace with and within

ourselves. Peace with other people. And peace with the whole creation. In a world that the Pax Romana, the peace imposed by Rome, came from the military strength and economic power of the Romans, the word “shalom” on the lips of Christ sounded like an invitation to dare to imagine a new life rooted in God’s desire that everything in our lives may work in peaceful harmony for the well-being of humankind and creation.

I believe that when the disciples heard that familiar greeting, they understood that the Risen Christ was giving them an option. They could go back to Galilee and live unsatisfied, unhappy, unwell and incomplete lives under the unjust and violent peace offered by the Roman Empire or they could refuse to become hostage to the reality around them, embrace the wholeness, goodness, well-being and vitality of “shalom” and raise their voices to preach shalom, to invite others to experience God’s shalom in their hearts and to offer humankind a much more robust and meaningful peace than the Roman peace, namely, the life-transforming and world-changing peace of Jesus Christ.

A few weeks ago, the lyrics of a Brazilian song entitled “*My Soul (The Peace I do not want)*”<sup>13</sup> made me think of this passage at the end of the Gospel of Luke. Over and over again, the singer sang the same lines: “***Sometimes I ask life, sometimes it is life that asks me; what is the peace I do not want to keep to try to be happy?***”

I had never thought about it before, but we never really ask ourselves that question anyway, do we? We never really ask if the peace we have created for ourselves and for our family is the one we want and need to be truly happy. But there is a bit of biblical truth in the words of that song. When the Risen Christ stands in the room with his disciples and offers them the gift of “shalom,” he was telling his friends that peace is a choice we make. It’s a way of life. It is a path we take that gives us the freedom to live fully and well. Christ gives us “shalom,” but it is up to us to accept it. It is up to us to let “shalom” give us the courage to let go of the kind of peace we have been desperately trying to hold on to in order to be happy and choose instead God’s peace that fills us with fullness life and joy.

On this Mother’s Day, I hope that Christ’s greeting will echo in the hearts of all mothers, inviting you to ask if the peace our culture offers makes you happy and giving you the strength and courage to voice what you really want and need to be a more whole person and mother.

You may not be ready or even have the time today to think about the peace you should not try to keep to be whole, satisfied, healthy and happy, but I encourage you to spend some time in the weeks ahead reflecting on this question. Today, I only ask you, mothers and all mothering people gathered to worship on this Mother’s Day, to open your hearts to the ancient priestly blessing from the Hebrew Scriptures. I love that the word peace, “shalom,” is the climactic word of the benediction. So I end this Mother’s Day sermon with these blessings –

To all the exhausted, overworked, underpaid, flawed, caring and loving mothers in our congregation and those who are joining us for worship today: may God give you peace.

To all the mothers who want to have uninterrupted and relaxing time alone today: peace be with you.

To all adoptive mothers and parents: peace be with you.

To all grandmothers and mothers-in-law far and near: peace be with you.

To all mothering men, uncles, cousins, brothers and grandfathers in our lives: peace be with you.

To all mothers who cannot visit with their children today and those whose children live overseas: peace be with you.

To all mothers who lost their children and all children who lost their mothers and will remember them today: peace be with you.

To all who hurt and feel sad on this day: may God's shalom be with you.

To all who can celebrate it: happy Mother's Day! May God's shalom be with you, bring you joy and make you whole. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> By Anne Lamott in her “Annual Mother’s Day” post on Facebook, 07 May 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/AnneLamott>.

<sup>2</sup> By Margaret Renkl in *Mother’s Day Can Be Painful. It Can Also Reconnect Us to the World*, Guest Essay, Opinion, The New York Times, 03 May 2021[<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/03/opinion/mothers-day-loss-nature.html?searchResultPosition=2>].

<sup>3</sup> Romans 12:15-16a, 18.

<sup>4</sup> Wendy Farley in *Beguiled by Beauty*, p. 135 [Kindle Edition].

<sup>5</sup> Long text translations by John-Julian, OJN, and commentary by Frederick S. Roden, AOJN in *Love’s Trinity: A Companion to Julian of Norwich*, p. 231.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> By Anne Lamott in her “Annual Mother’s Day” post on Facebook, 07 May 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/AnneLamott>.

<sup>8</sup> By Amy Joyce and Ellen McCarthy in *Working moms are not okay*, On Parenting, The Washington Post, 30 October 2020, [[https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/on-parenting/working-moms-covid-pandemic-jobs/2020/10/29/e76a5ee0-0ef5-11eb-8a35-237ef1eb2ef7\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/on-parenting/working-moms-covid-pandemic-jobs/2020/10/29/e76a5ee0-0ef5-11eb-8a35-237ef1eb2ef7_story.html)].

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in *The Pandemic Is a ‘Mental Health Crisis’ for Parent*, by Jessica Grose in the New York Times, 09 September 2020 [<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/09/parenting/mental-health-parents-coronavirus.html>].

<sup>10</sup> The hard toll of pandemic parenting, On Parenthood PhD, published on 06 May 2021 [<https://www.parenthoodphd.com/parenting-in-academia/2021/3/6/the-hard-toll-of-pandemic-parenting>].

<sup>11</sup> Quoted by Terri Rugar in *Why I deserve to be left alone for Mother’s Day, and you do too*, published in 19News.org, 06 May 2021 [<https://19thnews.org/2021/05/mothers-day-alone/>].

<sup>12</sup> By David Brooks in *The Nuclear Family Was a Mistake*, published in The Atlantic, March 2020 Issue [<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/03/the-nuclear-family-was-a-mistake/605536/?fbclid=IwAR02liBgCitRBtnwPrY2YROMNCMOonZW3rvG89I93M2sBshF3mcn5elCGp4>].

<sup>13</sup> *Minha Alma* (A Paz que Eu Não Quero), O Rappa, words by Marcelo Yuka, 1999.