

“Be A Gift to the World”

Acton Congregational Church (United Church of Christ)

14 May 2023

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Texts: Acts 1:1-11

John 17:11-19

“As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.”

– John 17:18

Prayer

**God who transcends all our binary conceptions of male and female,
But who still comes to us as a Protective Mother and Loving Father,**

We gather this morning to be surprised by your Word.

Speak to us, Holy One, as a wise Mother would,

So your Living Word may be neither

too big for our minds to grasp its truth

Nor too small for our ears to dismiss its wisdom.

In the name of Jesus Christ, our Sibling, we pray. Amen.

From the time I finished my master’s degree in theology to the day I was offered my first call to serve as a solo pastor, a major cultural shift was already underway in the Church. In seminary, my professor of Liturgy and Homiletics made sure that all soon-to-be-pastors understood the risk of either overlooking or ignoring Mother’s Day. Even though Mother’s Day is not a holy Feast on the Christian calendar, Dr. Fred Hopper urged his students to be attentive to one of the few opportunities we would have in the church to honor women as vessels of new life and the embodiment of unconditional love. Dr. Hopper’s pastoral advice was that preachers should always say something – whether it is something deeply theological or witty or simply amusing it doesn’t matter too much – but pastors should always say something meaningful about mothers on Mother’s Day because the experience of motherhood may be the best metaphor humankind will ever have to speak about God’s creative power and life-giving love.

In my first year in parish ministry, I was ready to go all out for Mother’s Day! I was so eager to make the most of the holiday that I started planning the service at the beginning of March. But when I sat down with the worship committee, I realized things on the ground were very different from what I had expected. Much to my surprise, the worship team was split over the idea of celebrating Mother’s Day in the church. They reminded me that our denomination, the United Church of Christ, in its faithful attempt to be more inclusive and expansive, invites local congregations to mark the second Sunday of May as the “Festival of the Christian Home.” But some of the women on the committee took issue with this attempt to be inclusive for excluding the inter-faith families in the pews. A couple of the younger women expressed their frustration at the holiday for purportedly turning motherhood into the litmus test of a woman’s worth to society. On the other side of the divide were two old-timers who were thrilled with the

possibility of honoring mothers during the worship service. They even talked about bringing back the old tradition of wearing carnations on the left side – the side of your heart - on Mother's Day: a white carnation to honor deceased mothers and a red carnation to celebrate mothers still alive. And everybody agreed that if we made any mention of Mother's Day in the service, we might alienate women without children, families with two dads, and, most of all, those in the pews whose mothers fell terribly short from the idealized concept of the selfless, nurturing and always loving mother, which is still very prevalent in our culture.

It was emotionally exhausting to listen to all the different and conflicting opinions about Mother's Day, but I was proud of how the people in my first parish were thinking carefully about not only those we gladly include in our churches, but also about those who feel excluded by our cultural traditions and religious practices.

At one point during the long meeting with the worship committee, a woman, probably noticing how baffled I was at the controversy Mother's Day had sparked, leaned over toward me and said, ***"Reverend, the problem with Mother's Day is that everyone had a mother."*** And here is the kernel of truth and the seed of wisdom in the words of that wise woman: every single one of us came into the world through the body of a mother. We all began our journey as human beings because a woman, regardless of whether she was prepared for it or not, surrendered her body to pregnancy. We are in the world because a mother – despite all her imperfections and mistakes – gave us her body and blood until we could have a chance to breathe and exist on our own.

And mothers are usually the first human beings who teach us about life in the world. I remember fondly the simple and yet essential life lessons my own mother taught me. My mother was the first person to teach me about conflict resolution – ***"Apologize to your brother or you'll spend the rest of the day in your room."*** My mother taught me about taking instructions seriously – ***"Do it because I told you so."*** Even though we were not a religious family, mother taught me about the importance of prayer – ***"You'd better pray this stain will come off the couch."*** She made me aware of global issues – ***"There are hungry children in Africa, and you won't eat your salad?"*** She taught me about caring for the common good – ***"Don't forget to put the toilet seat down after you pee and make sure you aim right in the bowl."*** Mother taught me about expectations – ***"I raised you better than that."*** She taught me to be a good planner – ***"Always wear clean underwear when you go out in case you are in some kind of accident."*** And perhaps one of the greatest lessons my mother taught me was her own understanding of motherhood – ***"You are my son, but I am not raising you for myself. I am raising you to live in the world and this world is not always a very kind and forgiving place, but I hope you will be a gift to the world as you are a gift to me."***

"Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me... I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one... As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world." These prayerful words Jesus said at the table of his last meal with the disciples

express the faith, feelings and hopes of millions of mothers throughout the world. Every single day a mother, somewhere, whispers a prayer that is in its essence very similar to Jesus' own passionate pleading with God to protect his friends, to keep his followers safe, to give them joy in their life, and to set them aside to do meaningful work for the sake of the world. One of the things I love about this heartfelt prayer of Jesus is that even though Jesus uses a very traditional male image to describe God, he does pray like a loving mother who knows that the children she nurtured in her womb, breastfed, held in her arms and taught to walk will eventually have to live in the world without her. This is a good reminder for the Church that while it is perfectly fine to speak of God as "**Our Father**," our spiritual life and our religious experiences are not complete until we also experience God as "**Our Mother**."

John is the only evangelist that allows us to eavesdrop on this time of prayer in the upper room. Jesus knew that the end of his time with his dearest disciples was near. After giving his closest friends instructions to remain faithful to his teachings, love one another and bear the fruit of faith in their living, Jesus prays for the well-being of the disciples, for their safety and unity, but Jesus refuses to ask that his followers be spared the messy, sometimes painful, other times violent, oftentimes complex reality of life in this world.

I imagine that Jesus was aware that once they got up from the table of the Last Supper and left the upper room to go to the garden¹ where he would be arrested – fear, anger, disbelief, sadness, and hopelessness might tempt the disciples to see the world as being inherently evil, to withdraw from the world, and to practice a spirituality of "*fuga mundi*" or "*escape from the world*," which has inspired Christians to wall themselves off from the world by receding into the cloisters of monastic life. For Jesus, this was a moment fraught with emotional distress and the sharp pangs of separation, but their last meal together was not completely devoid of hope and even joy. This was the very moment that would set into motion the birth of the Church. And to leave no room for doubt, Jesus makes it clear that the place of his Church is in the world. Much like a mother, Jesus conceived the Church, nurtured her faith, gave his followers instructions on how to live the Christian life and now he sends the same Church into the world as a gift. As New Testament Professor Frances Taylor Gench puts it, "**The spirituality** [of Christ] **is by no means an other-worldly experience or an end in itself.** [The teachings of Christ are] **decidedly world-engaged.**"²

The passage from the Book of Acts that Kyoko Loverin read this morning reaffirms the world-engaged spirituality that Jesus entrusted to the Church. This is a familiar lesson that is often assigned to the Day of the Feast of the Ascension of the Lord, which will be celebrated this coming Thursday or forty days after Easter. The writer of the Gospel of Luke continues to tell the story of Jesus and his first followers to "**Theophilos**" or to all "**Lovers of God**." In this morning's reading, the Risen Christ is still with his disciples and his first followers are still trapped in their nationalistic aspirations, hoping that Jesus is the Messiah that will make Israel great again. But what they hear is the instruction to be witnesses of the teachings of Jesus "**in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.**" And as the Risen Lord was

Sermons are meant to be preached and, therefore, all sermons are prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation rather than on proper grammar and punctuation required of written documents.

speaking to the disciples about their work and mission in the world, the story claims that “[The Risen Christ] **was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.**”

This language of the Ascension makes a lot of people in the pews uncomfortable. There are still too many post-modern Christians who read the Bible literally and end up missing the more consequential part of the story. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says that he refuses to vex about this prescientific attempt to describe how the Jesus of history is now **“high and lifted up.”**³ What matters is not so much how Jesus was taken up, but that now it is the Church, in other words you and me that keep Jesus’ teachings, Jesus’ promises, his love and his faith alive in this world that is not always very loving, kind, joyful, hopeful or forgiving.

Of course, the disciples were struggling emotionally and spiritually to let go of Jesus for a second time. They didn’t understand what had just happened. One moment Jesus was right there with them; the next moment Christ had vanished into thin air. Confused and stunned, they were unable to move, their eyes still searching for signs of the Risen Christ. And just then two men in white robes appeared and asked them, **“Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven?”** This question seems harsh after all the disciples were once again wrestling with their feeling of being left alone in the world. But the two men in white were making sure the disciples would not be paralyzed by their longing to see Jesus in flesh and blood, to go back to the way things were when Jesus was within their reach. Instead, they wanted the disciples to stop staring at the sky and get busy. Rather than looking up, it was time to look around and out into the world where they would embody the motherly words of Jesus’ prayer, **“And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world.”**

The tricky part of being the Church in the world is always the temptation to forget that Jesus also hoped that we would not belong to the world. I believe that Jesus had in mind that the Church he nurtured, empowered, instructed and sent out would be a gift to humanity and not a fearful and disgruntled religious community that is eager to make alliances with political ideologies, political parties, political candidates and economic systems that contradict everything Jesus embraced, preached, taught, lived and died for. It is quite shocking to see the ongoing attempts of many conservative Evangelical and Catholic Christians to impose their values and beliefs on others because they are still staring at a time or hoping for the returning of an era that will not and should not come back. It is heartbreaking to see many of our Christian siblings place their hopes on political hardliners and ultra conservative judges in a desperate last effort to make their religious views on gender, abortion, sexuality, environmental policies, and immigration more socially acceptable and even dominant. As my mother would say, **“We are better than that.”** And as Jesus said in his prayer, **“I have sent them into the world... Sanctify them in the truth.”**

Being sanctified in the truth of God’s Word is how the gospel writer talks about the Church’s call to quarrel with the world about what it is not but could be. Being sanctified in the truth is about our mission to quarrel with a Christian community that has allowed nationalism, racism, white supremacy, homophobia, xenophobia, book banning

and an uncritical understanding of individual freedom to overshadow the ministry of reconciliation Christ handed over to the Church Universal. Being sanctified in the truth is about your and my vocation to keep alive the ideals and essence of Jesus' teaching so we will never forget that in an unkind and unforgiving world, where there is enough pain and too much violence and cruelty, the Christian community can be an outside voice of solidarity, friendship, justice and kindness. Christ sent us into the world, but he never asked us to embrace the world to the point that we would no longer be the Christian gift that offers humankind a more hopeful view of life.

On this beautiful Mother's Day, I hope you will remember your biological mothers, adoptive mothers, grandmothers, mothers-in-law, men who mother you and many others who continue to nurture and love you as a good mother would. I hope you can find the strength to forgive your mother if she failed to be a loving presence in your life. I hope you can be thankful for the opportunities you have been given to be like a loving mother to someone else. I also hope that you will give thanks for the Mother Church where we hear every week the challenging, comforting, inspiring and at times maddening teachings of Jesus. I hope you will be thankful today for Mother Earth and all the gifts she gives to all living beings. I hope that you will remember that Christ, like a loving mother, prayed that we might live in the world, be engaged with worldly issues, but that we would never conform to this world. I hope you will think of ways that we may be a gift to each other here at ACC and to the people in Acton and all the surrounding towns where we live and work. I hope that today, rather than staring at each other and the walls of this building, you and I can take Jesus' instructions to heart and go out of this place eager to be a gift to the world just like our mothers hoped; just like our God wills; just like Jesus said in his prayer.

May it be so. Happy Mother's Day.

¹ John 18:1.

² Frances Taylor Gench in Encounters with Jesus, p. 112.

³ Walter Brueggemann in Collected Sermons of Walter Brueggemann, The Good News of Cosmic Regime Change, p.289.