Mothering Persons, Mothering God, Mother Earth
A Mothers’ Day, 2021, Sermon

Today is Mothers’ Day – a day set aside to honour our mothers - and, equally important, to show our appreciation and respect for motherhood and mothering all around the world. We’ll be doing that today with gifts and flowers and candy and greeting cards and in many other ways. There’s no doubt in my mind that, in spite of our current pandemic lockdown, family members and other loved ones will find many new and creative - indeed, wonderful! - ways to celebrate this special day. And rightly so!

So, as we prepare to observe Mothers’ Day I urge you to remember that here in Canada the reasons for celebration are ever-evolving, ever-changing, ever-more complex. Let me explain.

In North America, Mothers’ Day celebrations began way in 1872 when, after the dreadful carnage of the American Civil War, Julia Ward Howe first advocated a “Mothers’ Day of Peace”.
Later, another American woman, Anna Jarvis campaigned to have a considerably different kind of Mother’s Day observed in the United States. She did this for one reason and one reason only - to honour her mother, Ann Reeves Jarvis, who spent her life in selfless humanitarian service and had a dream of a national memorial day to honour mother and their work at home and in the community. When Ann Reeves Jarvis died in 1905 her daughter, Anna was determined to make her mother’s dream come true. She campaigned hard to make Mother’s Day a recognized holiday in the United States and eventually chose the second Sunday in May, the Sunday closest to the day her mother had died, as a day for Mother’s Day.

But Anna’s Mother’s Day dream was different from her what her mother had in mind as a memorial day for all mothers and their work and service in the community. Anna had the perspective of a devoted daughter and her motto was “For the Best Mother who Ever Lived – Your Mother”. Anna envisioned
the Mother’s Day holiday as “a home-coming, a day to honour your own mother, the one woman who dedicated her life to you”.

Anna’s advocacy paid off big time. Celebrating Mother’s Day began in Andrews Methodist Episcopal Church in Grafton, West Virginia, on the second Sunday in May only a few years after her mother’s death. Mother’s Day celebrations caught on big time, and rapidly spread in popularity. In 1914 U.S. President Woodrow Wilson designated Mother’s Day a national holiday. Following the example of our neighbour to the south, the second Sunday in May was also adopted in Canada as the official day for the observance of Mother’s Day.

Unfortunately, this Mother’s Day story didn’t end well for Anna Jarvis. She was appalled by the commercialization of this special day which she had dedicated to the selfless service of her mother. By 1920, she fought to have the designation of Mother’s Day as an official holiday rescinded, often referring to commercial interests like florists and jewellers and greeting card companies –
and others including charitable fundraisers - capitalizing on Mother’s Day as “charlatans, bandits, pirates, racketeers, kidnappers and termites”. Anna Jarvis continued her fight against the commercialization of Mother’s Day until 1948, when, at the age of eighty, she died penniless in a Philadelphia sanatorium. I should add that for generations Anna Jarvis’ descendants honoured her and her crusade against commercialization by refusing to celebrate Mother’s Day.

And to state the obvious, Anna Jarvis vision of Mother’s Day was a narrow and limited one, confined to honouring only our birth mothers, forgetting that not all mother-child relationships are ideal, happy and healthy, and ignoring the mothering and nurturing roles of other persons in our lives.

Yet, Mothers’ Day continues to this day. Yes, the idea of honouring and celebrating our own mothers continues. And yes, the commercialization of Mother’s Day is taken for granted. But today in the 21st century there’s brand new emphasis.
Mothers’ Day is now a day to honour all persons – past and present - who have taken part in mothering or nurturing us in many different ways. This includes the expectant mother, the mother who has lost a child to death but somehow finds the strength to carry on, the woman who is a mother through adoption or providing foster care, the mothering partner in a gay marriage, and the woman who has no children of her own but nurtures everybody she meets.

And so, on this Mothers’ Day, 2021, we thank God for all these nurturing, mothering persons.

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Now, for a few moments, I’d like to change directions and talk about the church and its involvement in Mothers’ Day.

The Church and Mother’s Day

I’ve already mentioned that the first Mother’s Day in the U.S.A. was observed in Andrews Methodist Episcopal Church in
Grafton, West Virginia, in the early 20th century. But the fact is, the Christian Church was involved in the observance of Mothers’ Day many centuries before that. And this involvement still influences our modern day Mothers’ Day, especially our Christian Family celebrations.

In 16th century England the church observed a special Sunday called Mothers’ Day, or more accurately, Mothering Sunday, which had no connection whatsoever to mothers. Back in those days, Mothering Sunday was a strictly a religious affair. Once a year, usually in the middle of the season of Lent, people had to return to their ‘mother church’ which was the main cathedral or church in the region.

Inevitably, as time passed, people returning to the ‘mother church’ became an occasion for family reunions when children who were working away returned home. And we’re not talking about adult children. Back in 16th century England it was common for children to leave home once they were 10 years old - the boys
to be apprenticed – and the girls to work as domestic servants. On Mothers’ Day – or Mothering Day - in the 16th century and for centuries later – these English children would pick wild flowers and violets along the country lanes to take to church or to give their mothers as a small gift.

I should mention too that this idea of returning to the ‘mother church’ was based on the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Galatians (4:21-31) which was written in the year 54 or 55 A.D. Here he refers to Christians returning to the ‘mother church’ in Jerusalem, which (he claims) *is free and the mother of us all*. But that’s not all Paul had to say about mothering. Again, in his letter to the Galatians (4:19) Paul writes, that he will continue *in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you.*

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The Early Church and Mothering

And, as we heard earlier in today’s readings, both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament are loaded with
feminine and mothering images for God. And this trend continued in the writings of the Church fathers.

For example, Clement, the bishop of Alexandria who lived from 150-215 A.D., wrote a book with the title *Salvation and the Rich Man*. In this book Clement wrote that in “ineffable essence (God) is father (and) in his compassion to us (God) became mother. (God) the father by loving becomes feminine.” As we reflect on Clement’s theological insights, it’s important for us to remember that Alexandria in the 3rd century A.D. was the hub of Christian intellectual activity.

Another example: Augustine, the 4th century bishop of Hippo in North Africa, wrote a book titled “Christ the Educator” in which he states, *The Word [Christ] is everything to his little ones, both father and mother.* Augustine wrote that to demonstrate that God nurses and cares for the faithful; and then Augustine goes on to declare in that same book, *God who has promised*
us heavenly food has nourished us on milk, having recourse to a mother’s tenderness.

And one more: Gregory, the bishop of Nyssa, who lived from 335-395 A.D. speaks of God’s unknowable essence in feminine terms. Listen to his words: The divine power, though exalted far above our nature and inaccessible to all...like a tender mother who joins the inarticulate utterance of her babe, gives to our human nature what it is capable of receiving.

Unfortunately, and in spite of warnings from Augustine himself, and with only rare exceptions throughout history, the church slowly but surely blotted out feminine and mothering imagery for God, and substituted near-exclusive masculine images for the divine. Sadly, with only a few medieval exceptions, this state of affairs lasted until the mid-20th century with the ordination of women, the rise of feminism, and breakthroughs in feminist theology.
So, on this Mothers’ Day let’s remember that limiting God to masculine pronouns and imagery is nothing less than limiting the faith and spiritual experiences of billions of Christians all around the world.

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**Mothers’ Day and Mother Earth**

I would be remiss in my preaching duties this Mothers’ Day if I failed to mention our relationship with the Mother Earth. Yes, Mother Earth, an idea that can be traced in a few different ways. But in the interest of time, I’ll mention only two of them.

**Traditions of First Nations Peoples**

The *first* is through the traditions of this continent’s First Nations’ peoples. You see, from the indigenous point of view all life is deeply related, and called to a responsibility of mutual care. Humans and earth and all living things are in the same family; and as the Incans suggested, in the same family as the whole
universe. Many indigenous peoples drew on the Mother Earth metaphor with the Algonquin nation having a strong oral tradition of Earth-Mother or Earth-Grandmother.

We can catch a glimpse of the First Nations understanding of Mother Earth from an 1854 speech the Susquamish Chief, Seattle, is said to have given to white settlers in the Puget Sound area. I’ll share with you only the highlights...

Seattle spoke to the white settlers saying... *Every part of the earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every meadow, every humming insect. All are holy in the memory and experience of my people... We are part of the earth and it is part of us... Will you teach your children what we have taught our children? That the earth is our mother... One thing we know: our God is also your God. The earth is precious... and to harm the earth is to heap contempt on its creator.*
The Ancient Greeks and Gaia

Second, the ancient Greeks spoke of the earth as the goddess Gaia, the great mother of all, creator and giver of birth to the Earth and the entire universe. Today, this myth has been incorporated into Christianity, the Wiccan religion and other faith and secular groups in the form of the Gaia-hypothesis, which is the idea that Earth is a living, self-regulating system.

As pure science, the Gaia-hypothesis has been pretty much discredited but it remains a powerful metaphor reminding people of faith and good will that we should consider the Earth as whole rather than a bunch of individuals systems and parts – and on this special day it serves as a reminder that the Gaia and Mother Earth metaphors remain powerful ones, especially as we consider human desecration of our planet – of Mother Earth - with our unrelenting and immoral exploitation of natural resources, filth, deadly toxins, pollution, environmental damage, climate change, sheer neglect and disdain...you name it! Or more to the point
perhaps: as the Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh puts it, our task as people of faith is “to hear within us the sounds of the Earth crying”.

**TAKE AWAY**

If there is a ‘take away’ from today’s service of worship and celebration, it’s an insight that the Mothers’ Day story is an

**ONGOING STORY – EVER-OLD, EVER-NEW, EVER-CHANGING, EVER-EVOLVING, EVER-EXPANDING.**

In other words, the Mothers’ Day story is an ongoing story of peace and love and commitment - an ongoing story of vision and devotion, success and failure, gratitude and compassion. It’s an ongoing story of nourishing and nurturing, motherhood and mothering.

The Mother’s Day story is your story. It’s my story. It’s our families’ story. It’s the Gaia story. It’s Mother Earth’s story. It’s the Church’s story. And it’s Mother God’s story.
So may it be. Amen.

Let us sing together MV 39, Mother Earth, Our Mother Birthing

Some Sources Used in Writing This Sermon


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