

“Heartache”  
May 14, 2023

Psalm 22:1,2

I can't remember who gave me the sage advice once upon a time. All I know for sure is I was just starting out in ministry and somebody cautioned me to tread carefully on this particular Sunday. It was phrased as a brief nugget of wisdom that came in the form of a warning. “Don't mess with Mother's Day.”

In other words, as a pastor it might be okay to change things around in the bulletin on most Sundays. To choose some unfamiliar hymns that no one can actually sing. Or to do something creative and unexpected with the prayer or the sermon.

But on the second Sunday in May, when there will be more long-distance calls made today than any other day in the year. When sales of flowers and greeting cards spike far higher than what is normal. And when attendance in worship often ranks not far behind Christmas and Easter as the third biggest day in the entire church year. This Sunday is a day when pastors would do well to stick with the tried and true. Paying homage during worship to the women who birthed us and raised us. And celebrating this beloved occasion which has captured human hearts and imaginations for more than a century...

History tells us that a woman named Anna Jarvis created Mother's Day in the United States back in 1908 as a way to honor her own mother. Ironically, some years later Anna Jarvis grew disenchanted with the commercialization of Mother's Day and she embarked on a personal campaign to try and put an end to the day she had started. By that point, however, the sentiment behind Mother's Day had gained too much momentum...momentum that culminated in 1914, when President Woodrow Wilson signed a proclamation officially designating the second Sunday in May as Mother's Day.

Fast forward to this second Sunday in May in the year 2023. The weather is cooperating. I trust many of you have long-standing reservations at nearby restaurants for brunch. Or maybe you are gathering with family to create a more homemade version of brunch at someone's house. And I suspect this day won't feel complete for many of us if we don't find time and a way to reach out to our birth mothers, our grandmothers, our stepmothers or any woman who has mothered us during our lifetimes.

Still, in the midst of so much admiration and fanfare, there is one truth that's often lost in the shuffle of this day. For many, Mother's Day is a day filled with deep heartache. If your mother has died within the last year or prior, today will likely be chock full of poignant memories. As you shuffle through old pictures or recall and retell favorite stories or simply make note of the empty chair where your mother sat in living color not long ago, you may feel hard pressed to celebrate this day. Mostly what you will feel is loss and loneliness and emptiness.

But the heartache of this day runs deeper. For women who struggle with fertility, Mother's Day is a yearly reminder of hopes dashed and dreams unfulfilled, particularly in our society which places a high and often unrealistic value on the ideal of motherhood. For women who have lost children through miscarriage or stillbirth, Mother's Day will probably give pause at some point, thinking about what might have been and who could have been.

If you are a person who takes care of your mother, this day might give you reason to reminisce about the vital woman your mother once was and the toll that life or a particular disease has taken on her. Specifically, if your mother is living with dementia or Alzheimer's Disease, and you visit her on this Mother's Day, it might feel like simply another day when your mother recognizes who you are only in brief moments of awareness. If she recognizes you at all.

For some among us, Mother's Day serves as a painful reminder of all the ideals your mother failed to live up to. And that will cause its own kind of heartache. If you have a mother who abused you. Or a mother who walked out of your life and abandoned you. If you have a mother who spent the majority of her days and nights addicted to alcohol or drugs. Or a mother who plays favorites in your family of origin and nothing you've ever done gives you the sense that you are as loved as one of your siblings.

From a different perspective, if you are a mother who has a broken relationship with your child that you cannot figure out how to fix. Or a mother who has lost a child to death and you carry the scars of grief with you for the rest of your life. The pain of this day will be amplified.

Scratch not far below the surface and Mother's Day is complicated. Emotionally intense. Contradictory and confusing. A day when the chasm between what is and what's supposed to be can feel especially wide...

It would be easy for me to stand up here in this pulpit and say that God is the antidote to whatever might trouble you today. I could preach a sermon about the God we know as both father and mother. And talk about the mothering God who promises to accompany us in our loneliness, in our sadness, in our resentment, in our anger, in our jealousy, in whatever emotion this day holds.

On the other hand, I know it's not that easy. There are times when it's flat out hard to feel God's presence, no matter how hard we try or how desperately we want to. For some of us, Mother's Day might be the kind of day where we turn to God for solace and relief while much of the world is posing for the yearly family photograph with mom right in the middle.

We hope God will be there. Yet it's possible God won't be there. Have you ever heard that old saying, "If God seems far away, guess who moved?" And the cliché answer that's supposed to go hand in hand. "Well, it's not God". As if not feeling God's presence is our own fault.

Whoever thought up that old saying never read the Psalms carefully. (1) When Jesus Christ hung on the cross, he didn't quote from one of the Psalms that might have given him comfort. He didn't cry out, "the Lord is my shepherd." Or, "I lift up my eyes to the hills". When Jesus neared his final breath, he voiced the first line of Psalm 22. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Are you and I really supposed to believe that Jesus is the one who moved...?

Living as a faithful Christian doesn't entitle any one of us to a sense of God's constant, steadfast presence. In our lifetimes, there may well be moments of profound spiritual awakening, where God feels as close to us as the breath we breathe and the heart that beats in our chest. But a life of faith comes with no guarantees.

So if you go through this day with your own Mother's Day heartache. And you turn to God looking for comfort and reassurance and God is nowhere to be found. Remember that you are not falling short.

Instead, you are walking through the faith valleys and lingering in the faith shadows that all of us will go through at some point or another. Faith is not all about mountains and hills and inspiration and celebration. Even on a day we hold as beloved and as sacred as Mother's Day...

In fact, I know this sounds odd, but if you go through this day and feel any kind of heartache, I invite you to think of it as a gift. (2) A God given gift. A gift that allows you to reach out in the midst of your own sadness and anger and resentment and loneliness and jealousy to those who also feel forsaken by God.

It may not seem like the perfect Mother's Day. Or the ideal Mother's Day. Yet offering support and compassion to someone whose struggle resembles yours is, in turn, the Mother's Day gift you have to offer.

A gift that will be received with gratitude by any person in your life who shares your heartache. Amen.

(1) Rev. Dr. Mary Luti, "You Do Not Answer", as found in the UCC *Daily Devotional* on Friday, April 21, 2023. (page 2)

(2) Ibid, pg. 2.

