

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles
Seventh Sunday of Easter – May 13, 2018 – Mothers' Day Sunday
Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister
John 17:6-19

FOR REFLECTION

“It also seems honorable that another woman would value motherhood over all my priorities. But I do not believe that I am selfish and she is not. There are women who chose motherhood for selfish reasons. There are mothers who act selfishly even if they chose motherhood in a burst of altruistic love. Selfishness and generosity are not relegated to particular life choices and if generosity is a worthy life goal--and I believe it is--perhaps our task is to choose the path that for us creates its best opportunity.”

~ Selfish, Shallow, and Self-Absorbed: Sixteen Writers on The Decision Not To Have Kids
by Pam Houston, Director of Creative Writing at U.C. Davis

“There’s no way to be a perfect mother and a million ways to be a good one.”

~ Jill Churchill, American author (b.1943)

Mothers and Fairy Tales

The text this morning is from what has been labeled Jesus’ “Farewell Discourses.” It is toward the end and is in the form of an Intercessory Prayer – it is the last prayer of Jesus before his crucifixion. The people John was writing for felt alienated from the world – not creation itself – but the human world where they were under siege from the orthodox religious authorities as well as the Roman occupation. So, this prayer was for them, as well as the original disciples. They were reassured that they were under the protection of G-d in Christ as well as G-d the almighty.

It is a very parental prayer, asking for things a parent asks for their child or children:

They were yours, and you gave them to me... [often we feel that our children are gifts from G-d]. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them... [We have at least tried to pass on the wisdom and faith G-d has instilled in us]. I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine... [We pray for them – your children that you entrusted to us]. Protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me... [We protected them while we were alive – now its up to you, G-d, to watch over these kids and be present in and around them].

I don’t know about you, but the world feels as dangerous and precarious as it did to first century Jesus people. We are under occupation by a dangerously powerful and

totalitarian segment of our population in collusion with a foreign government – and, although considered a mainline religion, progressive Christianity has been pretty much sidelined by an evangelical orthodoxy that feels THEY are under siege and insist on purity rather than radical inclusion. The intercessory nature of this prayer certainly speaks to the part of me that feels afraid and abandoned – longing for rescue and protection from the evils of the world. And it is the type of prayer I pray daily for my son – more vulnerable than I will ever be – because of the color of his skin.

Neither my sister nor I gave birth to children. My sister chose not to; I was physically unable. My sister was judged for her decision; I was pitied for my “disability.” And after my husband and I adopted Peter, we were praised for being so “generous” and “compassionate.” There is a social mythology about parenthood, motherhood in particular, that it is the highest of callings and the ultimate in female achievement – a mission from G-d. The thing is, my sister made her choice not to have children altruistically – to reduce suffering, as well as to curb human overpopulation. And I made my choice based on a selfish desire to have the meaningful experience of raising a child – not out of any desire to rescue or save anyone. And, as we all know, plenty of people who shouldn't have children – do – by accident or by design – and those children pay the price.

Our social mythology about the glory of motherhood as the highest of callings – finds balance in the fairytales we tell our children. In those fairytales, one or both parents die or abandon their child. In those fairytales, substitute parents are evil or irresponsible. The children have to come to terms with the challenges of the world on their own – learn how to parent themselves – find strength in higher powers – one G-d or a pantheon of archetypal super heroes.

And these fairytale scenarios reflect more closely the realities of most children than do the mythologies of perfect and loving parents raising angelic, courageous progeny who are unafraid of the monsters they will face in life. Many children, including my own mother, had to learn how to parent themselves – because their parents, one or both, were physically or emotionally absent. In my own mother's struggle, I have found my own path to parenting myself. An article by Bethany Webster (sent to me by a friend) lifts up the necessity of finding that “inner mother” and celebrating her on this day of complex emotions.

We live in a culture that either idealizes mothers or undermines them. Through this distorted cultural lens that there's not much space for mothers to be real human beings, with various shades of light and dark. For daughters with a mother wound, Mother's Day can bring up deep shame and guilt around having seen the darker sides of their mothers. There's no cultural validation for having been a victim of emotional abuse at the hands of one's mother. It's a silent road often met with bitterness, confusion and suspicion from others...

Acknowledging our mother's shadow liberates us to truly see our own light... By facing that gaping void of "mother" we open to an even larger and more powerful form of mothering, the Mother archetype within ourselves. This energy can then become a living reality that supports us. In doing so, we become newly capable of taking in mothering from other women, from the earth and from life itself...

Yes, your mother gave you life AND you have a right to your feelings about the dynamics of the relationship...The point is to honor that both are true. ... part of stepping into our full divine... power is to step into the role of the Inner Mother for ourselves. This doesn't mean we don't acknowledge our mothers, it's just means that we take over the PRIMARY responsibility for loving and affirming ourselves and most importantly, filling the gaps of what our mothers couldn't give us. It's such an empowering process. It helps lessen attachment to any toxic patterns with your mother and helps to establish a strong, healthy attachment within yourself, in which YOU become your own powerful source of unlimited love and nurturing.

Copyright Bethany Webster 2016-2018

Art Credits: "Rebirth" by J.J. Joyce

https://womboflight.com/happy-inner-mothers-day-acknowledging-the-myth-and-embracing-your-truth?inf_contact_key=82a76bece99d0f965de15ffc987dc1cf951a8986edc6a68a11365936f8bcd5a8

And then there is the fact that all of us, eventually, lose our parents, some sooner, some later. And with this primal loss, we have to learn to grieve in a whole new way.

Many of us have lost our mothers in the last few years, even months. Rosemary Jewell's daughter and son lost her in January, Julie Goudie's three daughters lost her suddenly that same week. And, you are overly aware, that I lost my mom at the same time. The myth would have us grieving the loss of our greatest champion and most loving, nurturing presence. The fairytale knows that our grief is mixed – feeling the loss of the one who gave us life and the best of herself whatever that was – and feeling the loss of what we never had and will never have – the empty spaces that our mothers were incapable of filling.

I am deeply aware that my mom did a better job of mothering than her mom did. I am deeply hopeful that I can do a better job still. And I am aware that Peter has multiple layers of emotions to deal with – a birth mother who isn't in his life – that he sometimes idealizes and sometimes condemns – and an adoptive mother who is very present in his life – that he sometimes finds comfort in and sometimes rejects. His myths and fairytales are so intertwined it will take him a lifetime to sort them out. Thank G-d we started a therapy fund for him.

It is my hope that his Inner Mother is strong and whole – and can nurture him, take care of his tender feelings, comfort and strengthen him – carry him through those empty spaces that this imperfect mother cannot fill. I already know that his sense of the Divine is deep. He has a partner in G-d, a heaven filled with guardian angels, and a pantheon of siblings who are super heroes. He will never be alone in the universe – no matter what my parenting failures may be.

One of my favorite artists, Mari Andrew, offered these words with her flower drawings:

Thinking of You
Mothers who have lost children
Those who have lost mothers
Those with strained mother relationships
Mothers with strained child relationships
Those who have chosen not to be mothers
Those yearning to be mothers

And I will add, for:

Those who have fabulous mothers
And those who ARE fabulous mothers
Those who have imperfect mothers
And those who ARE imperfect mothers
Those who have had to mother themselves
Those who found “other” mothers to do the job
Bonus mothers and birth mothers and adoptive mothers

May this day lift up the joyful and healthy parts of our relationships.

May this day strengthen and comfort those who need the help.

May this day, like any other day, abide in the heart of G-d whose children we all are.

Scripture Reading for Sunday May 13, 2018 – Easter 7 – Year B

John 17:6-19 * Intercessory Prayer

6 "I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. 7 Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; 8 for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. 9 I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. 10 All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. 11 And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. 12 While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled. 13 But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. 14 I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. 15 I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. 16 They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. 17 Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. 18 As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. 19 And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

Happy "Inner Mother's" Day: Acknowledging the Myth and Embracing Your Truth **By Bethany Webster**

We live in a culture that either idealizes mothers or undermines them. Through this distorted cultural lens that there's not much space for mothers to be real human beings, with various shades of light and dark. For daughters with a mother wound, Mother's Day can bring up deep shame and guilt around having seen the darker sides of their mothers. There's no cultural validation for having been a victim of emotional abuse at the hands of one's mother. It's a silent road often met with bitterness, confusion and suspicion from others.

Against the backdrop of the myth of mother's day with its sugary sweetness, adult children struggle with the unacknowledged dark legacy that was their lived reality of their mothers. That stark contrast can be a place of lingering self-doubt, shame and guilt.

I was recently speaking with a client who was struggling with the upcoming mother's day. She recalled a powerful moment when she said "something permanently broke" between she and her mother. In a conversation between the two, her mother was unconsciously trying to get her to play her long-time role of emotional caretaker, expecting her daughter to suppress her true feelings out of obligation. When the daughter did not obey this, opting instead to be kindly straightforward and honest with her, the mother simply replied "You're dead to me then." This statement revealed something in the light of day that had never before emerged in its entirety: the transactional nature of the relationship. For mothers who have been deprived emotionally, their daughters often represent emotional nourishment that they do not get any other way. Refusing to be nourishment for our mothers is key to our own healing as women. Otherwise we remain prisoners of our mother's own wounding.

Acknowledging our mother's shadow liberates us to truly see our own light.

As my client told me this story, it brought to mind my own moment where I felt something irrevocably break in my relationship with my mother. By speaking my truth that I could no longer continue playing the role of caretaker and longed for an authentic connection with her, she said in reply "I have no daughter." Her quickness to relinquish all connection to me in the face of my own boundaries based on hard-won self-worth was stunning. The implications reverberating through my entire life. Our relationship was largely based on a transaction, not love.

Mothers deprived of their own source of emotional nourishment will see their daughters boundaries as an attack and typically respond with a chilling coldness, devoid of anything we would call "mother."

For daughters who have experienced this level of "irrevocable brokenness" with their mothers, Mother's Day needs to be re-constituted from the ashes of the myth. It must be re-claimed in a new way that affirms the mother within oneself. One cannot go back to the sugary sweet, surface sentiments of mother's day after hearing those words come out of your mother's mouth. It is as though, in that moment, one is forced to really take in that void where mother should be, and take steps to fill it within yourself.

That day was the day my "inner mother" was born. Not as a fully formed aspect of me, but one that I had to cultivate every day thereafter.

As we face that glaring "lack of mothering" in our own mothers, we can no longer live in the fantasy world of "my mother loves me, I just have to be who she wants me to be in order to get her approval." By facing that gaping void of "mother" we open to an even larger and more powerful form of mothering, the Mother archetype within ourselves. This energy can then become a living reality that supports us. In doing so, we become newly capable of taking in mothering from other women, from the earth and from life itself.

From the fertile ashes of the "mother myth" a larger matrix of mothering can take shape, a visceral nurturing, profound holding that pervades our entire lives.

It takes work to grieve the myth of mother and the ways that we've suffered from the mother wound. Once the wound is opened, it is incredibly painful and yet there is also deep relief. Relief that what we may have sensed deep within us is revealed to be true, the shadow has been taken into the light. And what we see in that light, however painful, is

empowering because we can then build upon that firm ground of reality, not the illusions and projections that we've inherited through the generations.

"Can't you just forget it?" I was asked this several times by some in my family about what happened with my mother. I was amazed to learn that this is how many people move on. And this is what my mother expected me to do, to brush it under the rug, never speak of it again and go back to being her emotional servant. This is what women (and men) have done for generations upon generations: suppress and move on. "At mother's day, forget the shadow, be a good girl and suppress your pain for Mommy." This seems to be the general expectation of our culture.

I think of myself at 28 years old in the card aisle at the drugstore in Hell's Kitchen neighborhood of NYC where I lived, looking at all the mother's day cards. I stood there for about an hour, battling within myself. The part of me that wanted to avoid the exhaustion of conflict wanted to just buy one and get it over with. And the part of me that valued and honored myself would not let me do it. I realized that loving myself involved not enduring abuse from anyone, not even my own mother. It was my turn to do the expected thing in my mother line and I couldn't do it: absorb and carry my mother's pain as my own. That part of me that could not buy the card, that could not buy the lie, is my true mother, my inner mother. And I celebrate this part of me every mother's day.

The connection between inner mothering and outer mothering

If you are a woman who is consciously mothering yourself, celebrate and affirm how your own inner mothering will liberate your children from the pain of the mother wound. You are stopping the cycle, taking responsibility, metabolizing your own pain and clearing the way for future generations. This takes incredible courage and fortitude. Celebrate your commitment to this journey!

It's important to remember this:

Yes, your mother gave you life AND you have a right to your feelings about the dynamics of the relationship. (Especially for those women who have suffered deeply from trauma, abuse or neglect as children.)

The point is to honor that both are true. She gave birth to you AND your feelings are valid. You shouldn't have to suppress your truth in order to be considered a good daughter.

It's my belief that part of stepping into our full divine feminine power is to step into the role of the Inner Mother for ourselves. This doesn't mean we don't acknowledge our mothers, it's just means that we take over the PRIMARY responsibility for loving and affirming ourselves and most importantly, filling the gaps of what our mothers couldn't give us. It's such an empowering process. It helps lessen attachment to any toxic patterns with your mother and helps to establish a strong, healthy attachment within yourself, in which YOU become your own powerful source of unlimited love and nurturing.

My question to you is: How can you mother yourself this mother's day?

How can you embody an unconditionally loving mother to your inner child?

Here are some tips:

1. Journal about your truth: One of the things you can do is to write in your journal your authentic feelings towards your mother, to validate your own feelings and prevent any shame from getting a foothold. Give yourself permission to really be honest with yourself, to get your true feelings off your chest and affirm your courage to be real. This can help you get those challenging feelings off your chest so that you can feel lighter and freer. Imagine holding your inner child and reassure her that YOU as her Big Self will always be there to support and nurture her.

2. Find Evidence of Your Value: A powerful element of the inner mother is the quality of being a cheerleader, celebrating your achievements, wins, and all the progress in your life, even the smallest thing!

Exercise: Outer worth - Feeling your outer worth for your skills, talents, etc.

Sit down with a blank sheet of paper and write an exhaustive list of all the talents, experience, wisdom, and qualities you have. List every skill you have, every degree or certification, everything you can think of; big and small. When you think you are done, challenge yourself to think of 5 more things. Pull out this list often. Add more things to it as you gain more skills and develop more qualities in yourself. Pull it out when you feel down and need reminding of the extraordinary

person you are. Ideally, look at it every day, especially if you are trying to make a big shift in your life. This is a powerful mirror for your value and worth.

Exercise: Inner worth - Feeling your worth for simply Being.

Imagine holding yourself as a little baby on your chest. Feel yourself as the strong, loving mother, feeling how capable you are of holding and supporting this child. Then switch, feel yourself as the little baby, being soothed, held and loved exactly as you are, simply because you are. Allow your body to relax and be held. Take in that unconditional love and support into your cells. Awaken feeling refreshed, supported and energized, knowing you can always return to this place of inner holding and acceptance.

Copyright Bethany Webster 2016-2018

Art Credits: "Rebirth" by J.J. Joyce

https://womboflight.com/happy-inner-mothers-day-acknowledging-the-myth-and-embracing-your-truth?inf_contact_key=82a76bece99d0f965de15ffc987dc1cf951a8986edc6a68a11365936f8bcd5a8

