

Orphans No More  
Hosea 11:1-6; John 14:15-21  
Sixth Sunday of Easter, (May 14) 2023  
Mother's Day  
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*To the family we're born with, and the family we make along the way.*

-Higgins in *Ted Lasso*

*I will not leave you orphaned; . . .*

-John 14:18

*For a long time I have held my peace, I have kept still and restrained myself; now I will cry out like a woman in labor, I will gasp and pant.*

-Isaiah 42:14

In today's Gospel reading we pick up where we left off last week. Jesus is leaving his disciples. It is as if the disciples are children playing on the floor and the parent walks to the door and takes hat and coat in hand. The children ask, "Where are you going? How long will you be gone? When will you be back? And who will stay here with us while you're away?" John chapters 14-15-16-17 is Jesus answering these questions as he tells the disciples goodbye. These four chapters are called the "farewell discourse" and they take up a major part of the Gospel of John. As Jesus is saying good-bye to his disciples, he does not tell them they are on their own. He does not tell that they have no other resources other than their own willpower and independence. No, Jesus promises them help and guidance. He says, "I will not leave you orphans" (14:18).

Jesus intentionally uses parental language. The disciples are anxious, the situation outside the door is looking tense and confusing. Inside the door is talk of betrayal and mistrust. And Jesus says to them, “I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you will live also.” And then he makes a promise. After he is gone, God’s presence through the Holy Spirit will be with them, will strengthen and encourage them, guide them in truth, and give them perseverance and peace.

Paul gets at some of the same parental imagery a few years later, when in Romans 8 he says that we’re acting out of a spirit of slavery and fear, instead of realizing we are adopted into God’s family as children of God, and if children, then heirs of God. We cry out, “Abba! Father!” (Rom. 8:14-17). *The Message*, says, “God’s Spirit touches our spirits and confirms who we really are, God’s children.” In Christ, God has come to us, chosen us, adopted us and we belong forever to God.

“I will not leave you orphaned,” Jesus says. In other words, Jesus promises that we are never alone, never abandoned, never without the life-giving presence of God. We are not atomized, private individuals on our own. We are fellow children in the family of God.

This is basic message of the gospel. We are children of God, we belong to God forever, and, as Paul says, “Nothing. Nothing in all creation can separate us from being adopted as God’s children who are loved and included. Nothing!” (Romans 8:38-39).

Indeed, this is the basic message of the Bible in its entirety. The Old Testament is full of references of the people of Israel, being adopted as God’s

children. For example, Deuteronomy 7:6 says, “For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you (adopted you) to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.”

The Apostle Paul makes it clear that through Christ, we too are adopted as God’s children. And because we are part of God’s family, we share responsibility for all the children: our own, if we have children, our family’s children, our church’s children, the children of our friends and neighbors, the children of the community and nation, and the children of the world. In Christ, we see our kinship with all other people.

I want us to be clear about how central parental language is in describing God’s relationship. It’s relationship, relationship, relationship. Before rules or commandments or doctrinal disputes or the Bible – it’s family, specifically the family of God. We are God’s children. We are orphans no more.

And since the Bible was written over centuries in a male-dominated, patriarchal culture, the predominant parental relational language in speaking of God is masculine language. God the Father. We’re used to addressing God as Father and imagining God in masculine terms. We address God as Father when we pray the Lord’s Prayer and when we sing the *Gloria Patri* and the *Doxology*, which describes God in Trinitarian terms as God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And remember these Trinitarian terms are all relational terms, not simply functional.

At the same time, it is interesting that in that patriarchal culture, the Bible also has some female images and metaphors of God. God is described in feminine and even maternal terms. For instance, in Deuteronomy, it talks about the “God

who gave you birth” (Deut. 32:18), and in Isaiah, Israel describes God as the one who bore Israel from birth and carried Israel from the womb (Is. 46:3). In one of the Scripture lessons read a few minutes ago, Hosea speaks of God’s relationship with Israel in especially motherlike ways, saying, “I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and nursed them (Hos. 11:4). Isaiah 66 says, “As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you...” (Isa. 66:13). Then there is that passage in Luke where Jesus describes himself as a mother hen desiring to gather up her chicks because he is grieving over Jerusalem continuing their head-long pursuit ignoring God and embracing power (Luke 13:34). Then there’s Holy Wisdom, which is understood as describing God in feminine terms. God is also described as a mother eagle and a mother bear and as a woman seeking after a lost coin. Each of these images and ideas remind us that if we think of God solely in masculine terms then we’re missing part of the biblical understanding of God. We’re missing out on part of what God wants to say to us, and we’re missing out on part of who God is.

In this passage from John 14 and into 16, Jesus promises we will not be orphans, we will not be left alone, and that he is sending us the Holy Spirit to be with us. The Hebrew word for Spirit - ruach - is a feminine noun. And in the Bible, you can find both feminine and masculine language used in referring to the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, I remind you, that these words, all our words, referring to God, are metaphors, not essences. It’s the best we can do using our limited creaturely language to describe the Creator God of the universe.

So, as we celebrate Mother’s Day, if you’ve not already done so, perhaps this is a good time to expand your vision of God’s nature so that we might truly understand how humanity expresses the image of God as both male and female (Gen. 1:27). And as we do this, let us give thanks for God’s gift of mothers and

then think about the qualities that are present in our mothers, which reflect the nature of God.

Part of what that means is reflecting on the qualities we celebrate on Mother's Day. Much of Mother's Day celebration is downright sentimental. But it was not always so, and if we look to the biblical imagery for mothers, then we had better brace ourselves. It is far from sentimental.

Notice our insert containing the words of Julia Ward Howe, better known as the author of the "Battle Hymn of the Republic." Although others are given credit for founding the observance, Julia Ward Howe led in establishing what some believe to be the first observance of Mother's Day in the U.S. (2 June 1872) after witnessing the carnage of the U.S. Civil War and the Franco-Prussian War in Europe. The Mother's Day festival, she wrote, "should be devoted to the advocacy of peace doctrines."

Howe's concept of Mother's Day was to mobilize women as agents of resistance against the policies that led to injustice and war and violence. In her *Reminiscences* she wrote: "Why do not the mothers of mankind interfere in these matters, to prevent the waste of human life which they alone bear and know the cost?" Realizing it would require fundamental change to end war, she later wrote: "Let the fact of human brotherhood be taught to the babe in the cradle, let it be taught to the despot on the throne. Let it be the basis and foundation of education and legislation..."

The final observance of Howe's version of Mother's Day was held in Riverton, New Jersey, on June 1, 1912. The printed invitation on that occasion noted that "this festival ... is a time for women and children to come together; to ... speak, sing and pray for 'those things that make for peace.'"

Parallel efforts to establish a regular observance in honor of mothers were made by several others. On May 9, 1914, U.S. President Woodrow Wilson signed a joint resolution of Congress recommending that Congress and the executive departments observe Mother's Day. The next year, the President was authorized to proclaim Mother's Day as an annual national observance.

Which brings us to today. Here we are celebrating and honoring mothers in a nation, in the state Texas awash with the blood of children killed in mass shootings. If there is ever a day to shout again Julia Ward Howe's words it is today: "Arise, all women who have hearts, whether your baptism be that of water or of tears ...!" Arise all women and mothers, arise all men and fathers, enough is enough!

Last week, our friend Flora Farago posted on her Facebook page that she was shocked and horrified to see that of those victims murdered in Allen, Texas at the mall, was one of her old high school classmates, Kyu Cho, along with his wife and their 3-year-old son. Their 6-year-old son survived because the mother used her body to shield him.

May God have mercy on us all.

I'll let you go to the websites of Moms Demand Action and Centers for Disease Control to look at the statistics of gun violence. All I can say, is what are we doing to our children?! All because of the worship and addiction to guns and the power and money that come from guns.

No wonder Jesus wept over Jerusalem and said, "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings" (Luke13:34).

After Herod ordered the mass murder of the children of Bethlehem soon after Jesus' birth, Matthew remembers Jeremiah (31:15) saying, "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation. Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more" (Matthew 2:18). Ramah is a small village just north of Bethlehem and Rachel, the wife of Jacob and matriarch of Israel, is buried nearby.

Matthew, echoing Jeremiah says that Rachel refused to be consoled over the murder of her children. Hear me on this: I believe in prayer. But every time a politician offers prayers with no action after every time children are killed by gun violence, the politician is offering consolation. And Jeremiah and Matthew both say, Mother Rachel refuses their consolations.

Consolations are worthless when politicians refuse to do anything about the guns.

In the Scripture we heard earlier from Hosea, the prophet says God grieves like a mother who nursed her children but who have turned their backs on Mother God and, "The swords (insert "guns") rage in their cities, it consumes their preachers and leaders, and devours the people. The murder rates soar, yet they are determined to turn away from me" (Hosea 11:6-7).

So, what do we do?

We write letters (everyday!), we march, we organize, we let our voices be heard and invite others to join us. We join with people like Mother Julia Ward Howe in resisting the violence and resisting the power and profit being made off the violence. We join together and raise our children differently. Remember all

these children in our church are our children. And all these children in our town and beyond.

And we pray! Pray for the very same Holy Spirit Jesus promised us. Pray for the Holy Spirit to guide us unto all truth. And pray for the comfort of the Spirit, that will sustain us in the midst of trouble and travail.

My old friend, Ken Sehested, says that the Holy Spirit gives us steadfast endurance, the capacity to *keep on keepin' on*. Ken suggests relentless persistence and resistance to violence and injustice is the decisive virtue in Scripture.

Fifty years ago, led by Archbishop Dom Helder Camara, there grew a Brazilian movement committed to nonviolent resistance to injustice (during a US-backed military dictatorship) that had as its watchword the phrase *firmeza permanente*, or roughly: persistent, resolute struggle, regardless of the odds of success.

Our prayer should be for the Holy Spirit to give us *firmeza permanente*, relentless persistence.

And mark your calendars for the weekend of Sunday, June 4. We are planning some sort of action – a vigil, a march, something as part of the national weekend campaign led by Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America. There is much going on that weekend, so it will be short and simple. But no matter what, we *keep on keepin' on*.

Most of you remember Ray Robberson, whom we buried five years ago. Ray was remarkable in many ways. As a boy too young and too small to drive, he drove from Houston to Mansfield (just south of Fort Worth). Ray's mother could not support all the family so the older brother went to Mansfield and found work. Ray



decided to join him and sat on a stack of phone books in the old car because he was too small to drive without them and he drove all night because he didn't want the cops to see him and pull him over, since he was much too young to drive or have a driver's license. The rest of the story is that Ray went to school, competed in sports, and after that worked on construction sites doing clean-up. The construction supervisors started finding him extra work so they could pay him more and they would also slip a little extra in his paycheck. He lived with his older brother, but it didn't take long for the mothers of his friends to begin inviting Ray to supper each evening. Each night he went to a different house for supper, and they made sure he had clothes for school and so on. They sort of adopted Ray and made him their own.

Ray was in high school, playing football for Mansfield, and broke his arm in a game. He was taken to the hospital and soon the ER waiting area filled with teammates and parents waiting to hear how Ray was doing. The doctor came out and said, he needed Ray's mother to sign for permission in order to do surgery. Three women stood up and said they were Ray's mom.

The doctor said, "I don't know or care who is Ray's mother. I just need a signature." All three mothers went with the doctor.

We need mothers who will stand up. We need fathers who will stand up. We need the church, the family of the living God to stand up.

Orphans no more. They are all our children.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.