

MOTHERS' DAY ~ 5th Sunday of Easter, May 10, 2020

“Arise then, women of this day!”

“Arise all women who have heart, whether your baptism be of water or of tears! Say firmly: 'We will not have questions decided by irrelevant agencies...Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn all that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy, and patience. We women of one country will be too tender to those of another country to allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs. From the bosom of a devastated Earth a voice goes up with our own; it says, 'Disarm! Disarm!' The sword of murder is not the balance of justice...As men have forsaken the plow and the anvil at the summons of war, let women now leave all that may be left of home for a great and earnest day of counsel...Let them solemnly take counsel with each other as to the means whereby the great human family can live in peace, each bearing after his time the sacred impress not of Caesar, but of God.”

I just quoted Julia Ward Howe's “Mothers' Day Proclamation,” dated 1870, five years after the Civil War.

“Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord;
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;
He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword;
His truth is marching on.”

That Julia Ward Howe, the author of what came to be known as “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.” (Her poem, which was later set to music, was published in *THE ATLANTIC MONTHLY*, in February 1862, a year into the Civil War.)

Julia Ward Howe was an abolitionist with the nerve and the fearless and untiring voice to be such in those days...and a feminist before feminists were called “feminists”...and a suffragette before the Women's Suffrage Movement...and, generally speaking, a woman to be reckoned with. And, oh, the mother of seven children. Everything was visceral and fierce and immediate with her. Truth was marching on, and she was marching on with it, by God.

(I must tell you that Julia Ward Howe was a Unitarian. She was a member of Theodore Parker's church in New York City. The basement of Parker's manse was a way-station on the Underground Railway. He always kept a loaded pistol on his desk, in case white thugs should try to interfere with slaves' freedom. Now that's religion.)

This is Mothers' Day. Mothers' Day is not in our liturgical calendar, but it's in our tradition and in our memories. Sure, it's the commercialization of tender feelings – and

some guilt. It's money well spent.

It was a woman named Anna Reeves Jarvis who re-introduced Mothers' Day in the U.S. It was she, never married and motherless, and her band of sisters who persuaded President Woodrow Wilson to declare it a national holiday, in 1914, not long before thousands left "plow and anvil," including my father, to go to war in Europe. In war and out, Mothers' Day has sweetened the second Sunday of May for decades. Incidentally, because the greeting card industry and the floral industry and the restaurant industry were sweetened too much, poor old Anna Reeves Jarvis spent the rest of her life trying to stop it. No luck. We love our mothers, and it's one way to say so.

I have fond memories of Mothers' Day, going to the First Congregational Church in Elgin, Illinois with our mother, my older brother and my older sister. We never considered it a duty. It was heartfelt, as best children can express what their hearts feel. We are cared about our mother, cared for her, knew the hurt she bore.

I wrote a poem called "Our Mother." It tells the story.

Our mother was a lioness;
at forty, widowed, without a lion
to roar away the terrors of the day
and none to enfold her in the night.
No property, no savings, no degrees of any kind,
only three children to enrich her life.
We inhabited the same shelter,
we, mother, fatherless three,
an upstairs flat at the top of Prairie Street in Elgin,
sparse, kept orderly, dusted and shined,
but for kitchen drawers, where roaches ran for dark.
And, as if a diet for kings, we feasted
on tuna casseroles
and meatloaf
and creamed dried beef on toast
and pot roast on Sundays
and, oh, molded Jell-O salads,
all the abundance in very little,
each the offering of her day's labor.
Though four of us in one tight space,
I suspect she lived in another world,
alongside us
or above us
or beneath us,

yes, beneath us,
to bear us up as we went our ways unworrying,
an exuberance weighted by sadness never said.
We were, I'm sure, respectful
and, I'd say, obedient.
But we knew little
of her loneliness in the night,
of her silent sufferings day-long,
of the unfulfillment of her life,
of, maybe, her wishings for something more
or other
or new.
Yet she would not shirk.
Nor would she cry when we were present.
Now, as I stand by her grave,
I feel such sorrowful gratefulness
and, pray (plead) for a soul the half of hers,

that lioness.

We live in our mothers for nine months, and they live in us for a lifetime. I know my mother lives in me, though I don't know exactly how and exactly when. She has to, somehow. My friend Erik Erikson used to tell me that, basically, we're formed in the first weeks after birth. I took him at his word. And I can believe it. Every once in a while, I look into the mirror and see my mother gazing at me and saying, John, in one of several inflections, depending on my behavior.

Jesus had a mother too, Miryam, whom we call "Mary." Paul didn't say anything about her. Mark says very little. Matthew, Luke and John do though. And Mary is central in the Roman Catholic tradition. There are, as I recall, eighteen "Mary's Days" each year in the Catholic Church. We have only one, "St. Mary the Virgin," on the 15th of August. But, if you add the Annunciation and the Visitation and the Presentation, that makes four. While some of our fellow Christians go much further than we, extrapolating all the way to "the Mother of God," we're pretty careful not to divinize Mary right out of the human race. (We can talk about that later.)

It's only fair that you know that my spiritual ancestry is, probably, among the Puritans of the Church of England. The Church of England was reformed, but not nearly enough they argued (and argued and argued) There was just too much Popery left in it. It had to be purged and the Church purified. The Puritans, in revolt, could, however, be revolting.

G. K. Chesterton, in *The Everlasting Man*, tells about a church sexton who, in a fit of

purification, took mallet and chisel to the stone statue of the Madonna and Child and laboriously and meticulously (righteously) chipped away every bit of the Madonna, leaving only the Child, motherless, unsupported, unrelated, unsuckled and unsung to, and absurd in its niche. You can't have Jesus without Mary for goodness' sake.

If I were to write a Gospel, I'd start exactly where Luke does. It wouldn't take me long to get to the “Magnificat.”

“For he that is mighty hath done to me great things...
And his mercy is on them that fear him...
He hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts...
He hath put down the mighty from their seats,
and exalted those of low degree.
He hath filled the hungry with good things;
and the rich he hath sent away empty....”

The Gospels aren't journalism. They aren't history as we understand history. They're the meaning of history, in this case the Christ-event. Luke may have known a few old eye-witnesses. He had all the stories and all the sayings that were re-told and re-said. And he must have had enough information about Mary to characterize her; so he put the “Magnificat” in her mouth, true, absolutely, to what he and others knew about her. She was some woman, some mother to her oldest child, Jesus, and his six or more siblings.

My loves, Jesus didn't come out of nowhere – or the sky. Sure, he came out of the synagogue, out of the Septuagint (the Hebrew Scriptures in Aramaic), out of a laborer's life in the world *and* out of his mother's womb and her way of living in the presence of God. And he came out of the Mystery beyond analysis. You've read the Sermon on the Mount, you've read the blessings, you've read the woes, all the parables, everything right up to the crucifixion and Jesus' last utterance, “Father, forgive them...” The Church is right to call Jesus unique, to call him “the New Adam,” “the New Being.” (I'd add “the one risen from the 'dead,' those in their indifference and unlove.) That's where I stand. But some of that uniqueness and some of that newness had to have come from Mary, his mother.

There's good reason that every generation should call her and all such as her “blessed.”

+John S. Thornton
St. Martin's Episcopal Church
Lebanon, Oregon
May 10, 2020