

Oneness and Mother's Day by Mary James

Texts: Acts 16: 16-34, John 17: 20-26

This may seem a strange way to start a sermon that is ultimately about the unity and one-ness to which we are called by Jesus, but here is a question: what do Mother's Day and *The Battle Hymn of the Republic* have in common? The answer would have been well known to us had we been alive in the late 1800's. It was in 1870 that the author of the by-then famous song *The Battle Hymn of the Republic* wrote a "Mother's Day Proclamation." Her name was Julia Ward Howe, and it's time for us to re-visit her story, because we haven't talked about her for a few Mother's Days now.

Born in 1819 in New York City, at 21 she married a reformer named Samuel Gridley Howe, a radical Unitarian who had become the director of the Perkins School for the Blind in Boston. Julia started life in a strict Episcopalian Calvinist family, but over time, she became a Christian Unitarian, and grew more and more reform minded in relation to social issues. As Jone Johnson Lewis (our source for this information) wrote, "she retained...her belief in a personal, loving God who cared about the affairs of humanity, and she believed in a Christ who had taught a way of acting, a pattern of behavior, that humans should follow." Julia became a sought-after lecturer and was a passionate advocate for women's equality, for women getting the vote, and for other social justice concerns. She published poetry, plays, travel books, articles, and often preached. She was associated with the New England Transcendentalism, along with the likes of Ralph Waldo Emerson, one of her many well-known friends. Her sense of humor and quick-witted intelligence were widely known and appreciated. She was active in the women's club movement, and helped form the National Woman's Suffrage Association. When Julia passed away, four thousand people attended her funeral service.

In the course of her eventful life, Julia Ward Howe worked with widows and orphans on both sides of the terrible, bloody Civil War. The social, emotional, and economic toll of this tragic conflict made a huge impression on her. In 1870, deeply disturbed by the toll of war, Julia became convinced that peace was as important a cause in the world as that of equality. It was her dream to have women from all over the world

cross national lines and unify in opposition to war in all its forms. Hoping to get formal recognition for a “Mother’s Day for Peace,” and to gather together women for a “congress of action,” she wrote and published a “Mother’s Day Proclamation.”

One hundred and thirty-seven years later, this proclamation is as powerful and relevant as when it was written:

Arise then...women of this day!

Arise, all women who have hearts!

Whether your baptism be of water or of tears!

Say firmly:

“We will not have questions answered by irrelevant agencies,

Our husbands will not come to us, reeking with carnage,

For caresses and applause.

Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn

All that we have taught them of charity, mercy and patience.

We, the women of one country,

Will be too tender of those of another country

To allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs.”

From the voice 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.”

Blood does not wipe our dishonor,

Nor violence indicate possession.

*As men have forsaken the plough 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 meet first, as women, to bewail and commemorate the dead.
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 own time the sacred impress, not of Caesar,
But of God-
In the name of womanhood and humanity, I earnestly ask
That a general congress of women without limit of nationality,
May be appointed and held at someplace deemed most convenient
And the earliest period consistent with its objects,
To promote the alliance of the different nationalities,
The amicable settlement of international questions,
The great and general interests of peace.*

Not exactly your Hallmark card kind of Mother's Day verse.

Though Julia did not succeed in her attempt to establish a formal Mother's Day for peace, eventually the cause of a day to honor women was taken up by someone named Anna Jarvis. Over time, a custom established by a West Virginia church evolved into a 1914 declaration of the first Mother's Day by Woodrow Wilson.

Julia died in 1910. Many wars later, her vision of a peaceful world with mothers at the helm has not come to pass. Humankind tends to think of peace and human unity as some elusive dream, the province of the unrealistic, something we can never really achieve.

Jesus would have us think again.

In John's Gospel, we are informed of an amazing truth, and it is this: peace is already available. This we learned in last week's Gospel reading. Christ has already given it to us. It is not an impossibility, it is not a pipedream, it is not a someday thing. It is here, it is now, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, it is always available. We need only accept it, and embrace it, and live it. In this week's reading, we learn that Jesus' ardent prayer is that all who know him might be one—that they might be in unity with one another, across all lines of division.

Imagine, imagine if we accepted the reality of peace and unity as firmly as we accept the presence of war and conflict. We see war as inevitable, and peace as impossible. But Jesus has said, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." He has prayed, for us, that we might "all be one." Hearing these words brings up a profound question: can we get there?

We know so well all the reasons why humankind does not stand in unity to solve common problems and to work together to feed, clothe and care for one another and to care for the earth that sustains us. We know these reasons so well that we can easily list why unity seems an unattainable goal. But, there are many things in the design of our humanity that have evolved that lend themselves to unity—things that are hard-wired in our DNA that would seem to predispose us to succeed rather more at this, if we would but allow it. And some of this is very relevant to Mother's Day—or Father's Day, for that matter—because it has very much to do with parenting.

Ann Fernald of the Stanford University Center for Infant Studies has made note of a rather marvelous cross-cultural truth about human parents and infants. From recording parents verbalizing to their babies in places all over the world, she was able to observe

that we all—no matter what language we speak—whether Mandarin Chinese or English or what-have-you—use the same tonal phrasing to express ourselves to our babies. Not only do we have these ways of speaking with the young of our species in common in the sense of pitch, tone and duration, but she also found that we tend to have four basic messages attached to these sounds that we make with our babies. These are: to praise, to call attention, to comfort, and to stop something. Think of it! You could pick up a seven month old Taiwanese child, and you would instinctively make sounds very like the ones the child is accustomed to hearing. Fernald found that sound is very like touch in its effect in parenting, and there is something universal in the way we offer it. Perhaps, just perhaps, if we saw the child inside of each person---as we know God does, no matter how old we get—we might be able to draw on the hard-wiring we have that leans toward unity a whole lot more. After all, Jesus' farewell discourse was offered in very comforting, parental tones, was it not?

Many Mother's Day gifts will be joyfully given and joyfully received today, as well they should be. Perhaps the best Mother's Day gift of all, however, is the one that Julia Ward Howe wanted to magnify in 1870 with her impulse to pull mothers of all nations and races together to live out peace in the world. It was her conviction that God had given that peace, and that mothers would be able to persuade the world to accept it. Mothers, Fathers, Friends, Sisters, Brothers.... Let us ponder the best of our parenting impulses as a resource that we have to practice peace and unity. The social sciences tell us more and more that it really could work. May the peace of Christ, already present, already given, be with you, in you, and lived as a reality in your lives, this day and always. May it reverberate throughout the world. May we live into the promise of one of Jesus' parting prayers, and live as one. Amen.

Notes:

The website www.about.com has a great deal of information about Julia Ward Howe. The information about her in this sermon came from this website, most particularly from the writing of Jone Johnson Lewis at womenshistory.about.com/od/howejuliaward .

Ann Fernald is a researcher at the Stanford University Center for Infant Studies, and I heard her speak about her research on a public radio broadcast; the summary here is my own summary of her words in an interview on public radio.