

May 10, 2020/Fifth Sunday of Easter

“The Great Emancipator”

Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16

Rev. Dr. Scott M. Kenefake

Welcome and Announcements

Opening Sentences

Jesus says, “Do not let your hearts be troubled.”

We long for abiding peace

and friendship that renews our souls.

Jesus says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.”

We seek wisdom that endures

and guidance for our journey.

Jesus says, “Where I am, there you may be also.”

We come to encounter Christ.

Let us worship God!

Prayer for the Day

Holy God,

in baptism you claim us as beloved children

and set us apart as witnesses to your love.

At times we forget

we bear the mark of your grace

and act as if you have no claim on our lives.

You call us to the risky work of justice and peace,

but we default to what is comfortable and safe.

You call us to ministries of generosity and compassion,

but we make little room in our busy lives

for gestures of mercy

beyond moments of spontaneous kindness.

Wash us again with your grace

And transform us by your Word,

that we might proclaim your good news

in word and deed. Amen.

Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16

¹In you, O LORD, I seek refuge; do not let me ever be put to shame; in your righteousness deliver me.

²Incline your ear to me; rescue me speedily. Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me.

³You are indeed my rock and my fortress; for your name's sake lead me and guide me,

⁴take me out of the net that is hidden for me, for you are my refuge.

⁵Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God.

¹⁵My times are in your hand; deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors.

¹⁶Let your face shine upon your servant; save me in your steadfast love.

Today, of course, is *Mother's Day* here in the United States, but did you know that it is also being celebrated today in almost one hundred other countries around the world? And that it is celebrated on various days throughout the year by many others?

You know, at first glance, Mother's Day appears to be a quaint and conservative holiday, a sort of *greeting card moment*, honoring 1950s values, an historical throw-back to old-fashioned notions of hearth and home.

But let's correct that impression by examining *the radical roots* of Mother's Day in American Protestant churches (Presbyterian, Episcopal, Methodist, Lutheran, Baptist, Congregational, etc., in both North and South) in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—these churches served as *seed beds* for the early women's suffrage and labor movements.

You see, in May 1907, *Anna Jarvis*, a member of a Methodist congregation in Grafton, West Virginia, *passed out 500 white carnations in church* to commemorate the life of her mother. One year later, the same Methodist church created a special service to honor mothers. Many progressive and liberal Christian organizations — like the *YMCA* and the *World Sunday School Association* —

picked up the cause and lobbied Congress to make Mother's Day a national holiday. And, in 1914, Democratic President *Woodrow Wilson* (the son of a southern Presbyterian theologian) made it official and signed Mother's Day into law. Thus began the modern celebration of Mother's Day in the United States.

For some years, radical Protestant women had been agitating for a national Mother's Day hoping that it would further a progressive political agenda that favored issues related to women's lives. In the late 19th century, *Julia Ward Howe* (better known for the "*Battle Hymn of the Republic*") expressed this hope in her 1870 prose-poem, "*A Mother's Day Proclamation*" calling women to pacifism and political resistance in the aftermath of the Civil War:

Arise then...women of this day!

Arise, all women who have hearts! Whether your baptism be of water or of tears!

Say firmly...

"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 often 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 -

Years later, Anna Jarvis intended the new holiday to honor *all mothers* beginning with her own — *Anna Reeves Jarvis*, who had died in 1905. Although now largely forgotten, Anna Reeves Jarvis was a social activist and community organizer who shared the political views of other progressive women like Julia Ward Howe.

In 1858, Anna Reeves Jarvis organized poor women in Virginia into "*Mothers' Work Day Clubs*" to raise the issue of clean water and sanitation in relation to the lives of women and children. She also worked for *universal access to medicine* for

the poor. Reeves Jarvis was also a *pacifist* who served *both sides* in the Civil War by working for camp sanitation and medical care for soldiers of the North and the South.

Although I've never seen it on a pastel flowered greeting card, Mother's Day (actually) honors *a progressive feminist, inclusive, non-violent vision for world community* — born in the imagination of women who devoted themselves to God, not Caesar.¹

So, happy *radical* Mother's Day!

I share this with you because there is often a large *disconnect* (that develops over time) between the *founding principles* of a *movement* and how it is later *commemorated* and *remembered*—or *mis-remembered*!

Our Psalm for today (Ps. 31) is a good example of this. You see, this psalm has been a source of *encouragement* to immigrants, women, and persons who are *not* Euro-Americans as they have encountered prejudice, hardship, and various forms of oppression.

Let's take a closer look: Psalm 31 is a *cry of an individual facing opposition and persecution from enemies* as well as *pleas and petitions to God for protection and deliverance*. While the exact source of the psalmist's distress is not known, the text includes many liturgical elements such as *petition, praise, and thanksgiving*.

It is also important to note that the psalmist is operating under the *spirit* of his or her *covenant relationship* with God. The total *trust* and *confidence* that the author expresses rests on the *righteousness of God* whose love does not fail (vv. 1, 16).

This is important to understand because when we consider the tensions we often experience between patterns of *injustice* that run rampant in our world *and our own faith commitments*, at least *two* implications arise out of our encounter with this psalm.

¹ Diana Butler Bass, *The Radical History of Mother's Day*, The Huffington Post, July 11, 2013

First, as an individual lament Psalm 31 suggests that we should not be surprised when *storms of opposition* come our way and threaten our existence. Such words as *deliver, rescue, and redeem* imply that we are surrounded by enemies and attacks are inevitable. For example, church bombings in the United States and other parts of the world, and persecutions against Christians in places such as China, North Korea, Nigeria, and some Middle Eastern countries indicate that Christians are still oppressed in some settings. While we do not need to lose heart or become pessimistic, it is nevertheless *wise* for us to know that there are *powerful, systemic forces of evil against which we must struggle*.

Second, the innocent and marginalized should *cling* to the *covenant God* for *deliverance and emancipation*. The psalmist *elucidates* that for the sake of God's name the Lord must *lead and guide* him or her (v. 3).

In addition, it is God's *servant* on whom *God's face* should *shine* (v. 16). The unwavering confidence in God's *salvation and redemption* that the psalmist displays arises *out of the fact* that God *who created the covenant relationship with God's servant* is also the *agent* of final judgment and salvation. This covenant God is *faithful and keeps promises* as we journey through this unfriendly world of *racism, sexism, and classism*.²

That's what this psalm is about.

Which brings us full circle back to *Mother's Day*—on this the 106th anniversary of its founding! So send your mothers, grandmothers, aunts and mother-friends *some love* and take a moment to honor the pioneering women who made this day a reality.

Let us pray—

Prayers for All Women, by Leah Schade

As God's beloved people, let us pray for the church, the whole human family, and God's good Creation.

² Simone Sunghae Kim, *Preaching God's Transforming Justice*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2013, pp. 227, 228

A We pray for women who are pregnant; those who are waiting with joyful expectation, and those who are filled with uncertainty and fear; we pray for women whose pregnancies are high-risk, and whose lives are in danger in the birthing process. Hear us, Mothering God,

All: Your mercy is great.

A We pray for women and men who long to be parents, but who struggle with infertility. Join their cries with those of Sarah and Abraham, Hannah and Elkanah, Elizabeth and Zecharias, that your will may be done in their lives. Hear us, God of Life,

All: Your mercy is great.

A We pray for women who are mothers, either by birth, by adoption, or through foster care. We pray that they may be supported in their mothering task by the men and other women in their lives; that their children may be provided with sufficient food, shelter and healthcare. Hear us, Mothering Jesus.

All: Your mercy is great.

A We pray for women who have lost children, either in utero, through sickness, through war and violence, or through tragic accident. Comfort them, Holy Spirit with your everlasting presence and assure them of new life. Hear us, Mothering Christ.

All: Your mercy is great.

A We pray for women who are incarcerated; women who have been abusive; women who have been hurtful and neglectful. Hear us, Mothering Spirit.

All: Your mercy is great.

A We pray for women who give of themselves not just through childbearing, but with their intellect, their skills, their gifts, and their physical abilities. Bless all women, that they may receive equal compensation for their work, may be protected from abuse and harassment, and may be valued as unique individuals. Hear us, Holy God.

All: Your mercy is great.

A We pray for those who are transitioning, those who are seeking to understand who God has created them to be in their bodies, minds and spirits. May they be protected from danger during their time of vulnerability and guided by those who love and support them. Hear us, Holy God.

All: Your mercy is great.

A We pray for women who strive to protect and advocate for those most vulnerable – children, the poor, God’s Creation, the disenfranchised, other women, and those men and women whose voices go unheard. Hear us, Holy Jesus.

All: Your mercy is great.

A We pray for those for whom this is a day of mourning and sadness. For those who have lost mothers and other important women in their lives, that they may be comforted with the peace that passes all understanding. Hear us, Comforting Spirit.

All: Your mercy is great.

A We give thanks for women who have been our mothers, grandmothers, aunts, sisters, daughters, life-partners, and friends. We give thanks for men who have mothered us with their own caring, affection, nurturing, and friendship. We lift to you (now) the names of those who have mirrored your mothering spirit, Holy God. (*congregation is invited to say names aloud*) . . .

Give them your grace and bless them in their lives. Hear us, Mothering God.

All: Your mercy is great.

A For who else does the church pray today? . . . For all those we name, and for those who have no one to name them, Hear us, O God.

All: Your mercy is great.

P Holy God, we lift our prayers to you through the Holy Spirit in hope, entrusting all for whom we pray to your great goodness and mercy, made known to us in Jesus Christ, our Savior.

All: Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

Charge and Benediction