

“Focus on the Family”

Happy Mother’s Day!

That’s a simple and heartfelt thing to say. But it certainly raises a host of complicated issues. To begin with, Mother’s Day is not exactly a church holiday. According to typically dubious internet sources, the misty origins of Mother’s Day can be traced variously to ancient Greece, Rome or Persia; or to Julia Ward Howe, who wrote the *Battle Hymn of the Republic*. But the most clearly documented trail leads to a woman named Anna Jarvis, the year 1912, and the first national proclamation of Mother’s Day, signed by President Woodrow Wilson. It caught on in a big way... \$! More people eat out on Mother’s Day than any other single day of the year. And the flower and greeting card people do a thriving business. Churches benefit, too, I suppose: taking Mom to church on Mother’s Day is still pretty popular.

Just in case you don’t have at hand your copy of the *United Church of Christ Desk Calendar and Plan Book*, I’m happy to mention that it designates today as the “Celebration of the Christian Home” and the beginning of “Family Week” in the UCC. So by any name, Mother’s Day is more than worthy of celebration.

But it’s complicated. For beneath the pleasant exterior of church services and corsages is the reality that motherhood, like every other human endeavor, sometimes isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. For some folks Mother’s Day is bittersweet at best, an occasion for grief or remorse or a sense of opportunity lost. Add to this what can become an overlay of rigid gender roles and the celebration of a subordinate status for women... well, you see, it’s complicated.

But despite all of this, Mother’s Day tries to point us toward an important reality. Father’s Day, admittedly, is an afterthought, somebody’s idea of equal time for whatshisname. But the importance of celebrating the basic unit of human community, the family, finds a convenient focus in Mother’s Day. So let’s go there: let’s focus on the family.

This title is an obvious allusion to the conservative Christian group that sees one kind of family as the absolute norm. That’s not what I’m talking about. I’m talking about families as they really are in all their wonderfully diverse configurations, including of course people who live alone and the folk to whom they are connected in various ways. There are lots of different kinds of families, and we’re including all of them.

Progressive Christians have tended to abandon the conversation when it comes to family values. But family values are important. Families are the foundation of society. When families do not function well, all our public institutions suffer. But what are families for? And, specifically for those of us in the church, what is the appropriate relationship between the words “Christian” and “family”?

A place to start is with our Gospel lesson for today, which comes from John 15. This is a part of what is called the “Farewell Discourse” in John, in which Jesus addresses his disciples on the eve of his death. He is expressing concern for what will become of them after he is no longer among them in bodily form. Throughout this Gospel Jesus has shared various images through which he is revealed, in the succession of “I am” sayings. I am “the light of the world,” “the way the truth and the life,” “the living water,” “the bread of life,” “the good shepherd” (from last week), and so on. In today’s lesson he offers the last of these images when he tells his disciples, “I am the true vine.”

It’s a nuanced image, but it’s also powerfully simple and direct for people familiar with grapevines. Grapevines appear to be an indistinguishable tangle of branches. But the branches that bear fruit are all connected to the central vine. That connection to the vine is all that matters. To enhance its fruit-bearing, the vine must be pruned, cleansed—those two English words in verses two and three of our lesson actually translate the same word from the Greek. A branch that loses its connection to the vine becomes useless and is thrown away; but even that which is connected must be pruned. A vineyard is a high maintenance enterprise.

“I am the vine,” says Jesus, “and you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.” He goes on to be quite explicit about what it means to bear fruit, the sign of connection to the true vine: “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love...” And what commandments are we talking about? “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” (15:12)

So it’s all about love: Jesus’ followers abide in him as they love; and their love is the fruit that demonstrates their ongoing connection to the true vine. It’s not so much about doctrine as it is about connection: abide in my love.

“Abide” is a funny word. It sounds so passive. As Matt and I were discussing this earlier in the week it occurred to us that most of the spiritual disciplines of the faith: prayer, study, worship and so forth are really aimed at getting ourselves out of the way. We read or meditate or pray in order to get our own stuff—our concerns and anxieties and agendas—surfaced and set aside. We replace the noise of our lives with a different kind of sound that brings us to the point of being able to listen; and it is in that listening, in the silence of that inner

space, that our connection to God is nourished. And through that connection we grow in love.

In the church we are bound together in a community of love, and we thrive not because of our connection to one another but because of our connection to the true vine, to Christ. So the sentimental old hymn perhaps is more subtle than we thought: “Blest be the tie that binds Our hearts in Christian love.” It’s not the ties—plural—that bind us to one another; it’s the tie—singular—that binds our hearts to the true vine.

Have you noticed this motif of the grapevine all around our building? It’s carved into the front of the communion table. It’s up along the ceiling in the narthex, this same figure of vine and grapes. It’s in a delightful wood carving out in the hallway. “I am the true vine.” Blest be the tie that binds. We belong to one another because we belong to Christ. If you’ve ever served on a board or committee with me and I’ve closed the meeting with prayer, usually the last thing I say is something like, “And now, O God, as you have been among us in our coming together, go with us each and all as we part; and help us to remember always that we belong to one another because we belong to you.” Jesus is the true vine and we are the branches, bearing the fruit of love because we are connected to Christ and abide in his love.

OK, but what does this have to do with families? It’s alarmingly simple: families are where we learn to love. That’s why the central images of our faith call on the image of God as parent—both Father and Mother are biblical images for God. We refer to others in the Christian community as “brothers and sisters.” When Jesus tells us to abide in his love, when the Apostle Paul writes in I Corinthians 13 that love is the greatest spiritual gift, when the first Epistle of John tells us that God is love, our first and best clue about what all this might mean comes from our families.

In families we are thrown together with people we did not choose. This is particularly evident when it comes to siblings: often we do not even like each other very well at times. Our bonds as family are not always a function of mutual enjoyment; sometimes we do, but sometimes we don’t. Do you always like your parents? Your children? Your siblings? Probably not: which is the first and most important lesson about love. Love isn’t about liking, or eternal bonds of sentimental affection.

Love is about things like respect, and honesty. Love is about the intimacy of sharing, balanced with the clarity and boundaries of self-differentiation. Love is about forgiveness: it means often having to say you’re sorry. (“Love means never having to say you’re sorry” is one of the most moronic sentences ever written in the English language.) Love is supporting one another in the achievement of

greater goals: people who know what love is know that it is not an end in itself but something that overflows to grace the world.

Families are where we begin to learn what it means to love. Not all of those lessons go well. Sometimes we don't experience respect, or honesty, or intimacy, or clear boundaries, or forgiveness. Sometimes in families we get so invested in having others meet our needs or fulfill our expectations that there is nothing left over to give to anybody else. That's why it is so helpful for families to find support in communities like the church, where we can think and talk and share and learn about how we can get better at this crucial matter of love. Here we can help one another stay connected to the true source of love, the God who made us and to whom we return. Here we remember that respect and honesty and forgiveness are things we first receive from God.

And here we learn spiritual practices that help us abide in God's love. Our Stepping Stones program is one way families support one another in the disciplines of blessing, prayer, sharing highs and lows of the day, reading scripture, giving and receiving forgiveness, and engaging in theological reflection. These are time-honored practices that Christians have used for centuries to stay connected to their own inner selves, to one another and to God who is the source of love. And these are simple things that anybody can do with a supportive community helping to strengthen the family in its central purpose of nurturing one another in love. Nothing could be more important to our happiness or to the fulfillment of our calling as human beings.

Abiding in God's love means knowing God, being connected to God, where we live. Families are for love. Happy Mother's Day.

Amen

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