

St. John's Episcopal Church  
Hamlin, Pennsylvania  
The Rev'd Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.  
Sixth Sunday of Easter  
10 May 2015

Scripture readings:

Acts 10:44-48

Psalms 98

I John 5:1-6

John 15:9-17

I'm not unhappy that we're using baptismal lessons today. They're good any day because for the most part when we gather as the baptized community of believers what does that mean? It means that we appropriate for ourselves some kind of relationship to the person of Jesus and the ideas that Jesus invested his life in and, in fact, spent his life for. Most of us fit into the category which in the first lesson really was a kick in the slats, wasn't it? The circumcised believers who had come with Peter - the "in" guys were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the gentiles - the geeks, the gooks, the nerds, the dipsticks, the foolish, the irreligious, the absent from church, that God's Holy Spirit in the Acts lesson is acknowledged as able to reach people whom the Church is incapable of reaching - for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. They heard the word of God expressed to them beyond the use of language in the terms of love and caring.

I used a naughty word in preaching at the baptism yesterday because the people who were here are not usually here. But there were 23 of them which is more than the 6 at 8 o'clock this morning. And you know my theory: you walk in the door and you're a member. Well, they walked in! *[laughter]* And there was worship and there was a baptism and here was this opportunity to proclaim that for Jamieson David, this extraordinarily beautiful little boy their job was to make sure that he knew God's love in every respect. What I said that was naughty was, "*That's even known by him when you change his shitty diaper.*" We need to be clean, we need to be fed, we know scientifically that we need to be cuddled and loved and rocked and held and kept warm.

Now, friends, that job belongs to all of us. By the way, we had a bare baby for the baptism. We used enough water so we didn't just do baptism by dribbling. You know the major images in baptism are burial with Christ in a death like his. You don't do that with three drops of water! I'm sorry. So we have a baby tub. It's back there over the safe if you want to see it. It's a chipped enamel tub - you know the kind that had fifteen pounds of potato salad in the cooler at Dutch's deli. So we had five or ten pounds of baby in there. It's also a symbol not only of the grave where we're buried with Christ in a death like his, but it's a symbol of the womb of the Church where Mother Church breaks water and gives birth to her children. That's what the Paschal Candle is all about. Believe it or not, this is a Christian phallic symbol. The first hot wax of this candle at the Easter Vigil is spilled into the virgin font. Get it? The impregnation of the Church by the erected and resurrected Savior so that in the font we recognize that those who are baptized here are in fact children of the living God.

We don't examine gender, parentage - you can't examine an infant for faith. You can't look in a baby's pocket for money. Maybe the mouth for a silver spoon, but that's different. We baptize all who are presented as members of the Body of Christ because we believe and teach and confess that these little creatures, incapable as they are of doing anything, are as much a part of the community of faith as you and I are. And there is no proscription about gender, color, culture, race, class, station, language.

You know one of the most corrupt pieces of scripture in the New Testament but one of the most effective to use which I've told you about before is depicted in the stained glass windows in the Muhlenberg College Chapel in the five lancet windows above the altar - is what we call the Great Commission: "*Go ye therefore into all the world and baptize all nations in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Lo, I am with you always until the end of the age.*" That we take into the Body of Christ even babies and understand them as full members of that Body. The Orthodox Church

underscores that in a beautiful way because in the Orthodox Church at a baptism a baby receives his first communion from a spoon. Members of that joyous communion of the saints who have gone before, who are at rest, who live now as well as those to come.

Now, have any of you heard about Mother's Day? I regret to tell you that even the pope talked about it today. *[laughter]* I was floored. *El Dia de Mamma*. But he knew what was going on in the rest of the world. Interesting pope. He knew what *we* were up to. We owe the Mother's Day that comes into our culture - and ours is different from the two that are celebrated in England - to a Methodist Episcopal woman who herself was never married and never had a child but was one of eleven children, half of whom died, and apparently a very strong mother. There are reports that she didn't like her mother too much either - but her mother gathered groups of mothers in their neighborhood to attempt to work on public sanitation because she understood that her babies were dying from disease related to infection and filth. And that evolved into encouraging mothers to care for soldiers injured in the Civil War regardless of whether they fought for the north or the south. Her name was Anna Marie Jarvis. She somehow got Woodrow Wilson - you remember that famous president. He's the only president, by the way, buried in the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. That's a great honor because you know in one of their stained glass windows is a piece of the moon. So there's dead Woodrow Wilson and a piece of the moon. It's an Episcopal Church - what can I tell you! *[laughter]* She got him to pass this as a national holiday.

O.K., so now you know about Miss Jarvis, you know about Woodrow Wilson. Let me tell you about Louise Luppold. You didn't know her but I did. Louise Luppold's husband immigrated to the United States from Germany and worked in a place in Hoboken - precision wood workers. He worked hard enough to be able to bring his wife to the United States, and they lived in a funny place in New Jersey called Fort Lee when it was still woods. Fort Lee is where the George Washington Bridge steps into New Jersey. They built a house on a double building lot and never had children. Louise desperately wanted children. Her sister had two boys and she confided in me that she offered to adopt one of her nephews from her sister, and that didn't fly. She loved both of her nephews equally but she didn't trust the wife of one of her nephews. The nephew whose wife she *did* trust was accidentally killed in a logging accident out on the west coast. At that point she came to me and asked me to help her with her personal affairs which I did as her pastor.

Every year on Mother's Day she would come to me and thank me through tears for remembering that on Mother's Day there were women who didn't have children and for remembering on Mother's Day there were women who had children and lost them and for remembering on Mother's Day that for some women having children is a biological function, period. And for remembering that men can do what we culturally see as mothering. And for remembering people like the one hundred-year-old woman I sat down to dinner with last night who had no children but functioned in great part as a mother to me and all of my cousins. And for remembering that the Church has a much healthier and stronger vision of humanity and the importance of God's love for all people than we tend to remember when we celebrate cultural events such as Mother's Day - and this goes all the way back to Anna Jarvis - when we're willing at times and in places to hand white carnations to you if your mom's dead and a red one if she's still living. How really hurtful, unintentional as it may be, we can become when we forget the joy and core of our faith as Christians, that we are baptized into the Body of Christ completely and wholly and in our situations whatever they may be and that the message is not that you are loved on this day for a little while because you laid an egg that made it and we'll get you home by supper so that you can cook it and do the dishes. *[laughter]* We really need to remember.

Was it last week we read about Philip and the eunuch? There wasn't going to be a Father's Day for him, was there. And the idea and the energy peters out by the time we get to June, doesn't it guys? Nobody's worried about you anyway because you won't do the dishes unless you have to.

Our joy as Christians is way larger than the claptrap we are often handed by our culture. By the way, the woman who started Mother's Day, this Methodist Episcopal woman by the name of Anna Marie Jarvis, quickly became very, very unhappy with the holiday as it was celebrated early in its first years because people bought cards instead of writing to their mothers and because of the commercialism that accompanied it.

Now in the Church in England Mother's Day is celebrated twice, and it ain't like ours. I said *ain't* on purpose. [laughter] On the third Sunday in Advent and the fourth Sunday in Lent, both penitential seasons, both historically when the color in churches was purple, the color changed on those Sundays to pink because the Introits for those days started with the words *jubilare and laetare* - "rejoice, be glad." And so purple was diluted to pink. Priests look funny in pink, let me tell you! On those Sundays in England it was understood that the help were allowed to go home to visit their mothers because they were all going to be working on the holidays. So two weeks before Christmas they could go visit their parents and get it out of their systems, visit their mothers, take them presents and spend time with them because when Christmas came they were going to be fully employed serving everybody else. And the same thing with Easter. So there are in the Church calendar to which we as Episcopalians are most closely related, two Mother's Days with very interesting and different emphasis and a much closer relationship to the Church calendar - those being celebrated in the penitential seasons.

There's also the business about us as Protestants. Now that's not a category I enjoy being in but there I am, having been baptized in the old E and R - the Evangelical and Reformed Church which became a part of what is now the UCC, the United Church of Christ. It was a German Reformed tradition, very much like Lutherans but also like pink and purple, it was a little bit diluted from Lutheranism, but not a bad tradition to come from. I've often said that I never learned anything in seminary that I didn't learn first and best at home. I thought my mother was the finest theologian I ever studied with.

Even though the Lutherans were considered way more Catholic than they, we still didn't have any churches named St. Mary. There was a huge response to the emphasis in the Medieval Church on Mary. Now we are the same people who would stand around and sing, *The B-I-B-L-E, yes, that's the book for me.* Well, Mary's in the Bible. In fact she's a major character in the Bible. But you wouldn't dare name a church St. Mary's because she was an Italian Catholic. You know that. That was a joke, O.K.? [laughter] And that meant she wasn't good or there was something to be afraid about. That wasn't Lutheran because if you read Luther's writings you find out that he had an extraordinary, deep and beautiful devotion to Mary and wrote extraordinarily beautiful things about her song, the *Magnificat*. But you will look long and hard in this country to find a Lutheran Church named St. Mary's. I would bet money on it that there aren't five.

So here we go with an ecclesiastical tradition that consciously and unconsciously works to eradicate any connection with biblical images of motherhood. Another ecclesiastical tradition which is headed by celibate male clergy develops this extraordinary devotion to the motherhood of Mary for Jesus and then we get into the middle of the nineteenth century and we have this woman who has a need to work something out with *her* mother and we get all messed up. Even today in the life of the Church there is active energy being spent, particularly in the Roman Church, to develop theologies of Mary as co-redemptrix and that is not Protestant but when you think about it, it's not so astounding when you make God into two men and a bird - Father, Son and Holy Spirit. [laughter]

As human beings we know that there is more to us than the sum of our parts but unless we get all of our parts together there's not going to be much to us at all. Yes, in your celebrations of Mother's Day you can say, "Well, nobody's here without a mother." That's true, but not everybody's experience of mothering is the same nor is everybody's experience of fathering the same. Hence we come in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century against such interesting things as feminism in the life of

our culture and the life of our Church. Where did she go? Where is there space for me? Why am I excluded because of my genitalia - or lack or difference - from ordination when you didn't ask any of those questions when you baptized me and told me I was a full part of the Body of Christ and when the Church needs people to stand in the footprint of Jesus. Mine is the easiest job in the world. By the time I get here all I do is stand where Jesus stood and say his words. That's why I put on another layer of clothing, this thing called a chasuble which means *little house*. It's to cover me up one more time so that you're not listening to any garbage I might have to say. You're just here listening to the words of Jesus being repeated over and over and over again. Does that have anything to do with genitalia?

So I invite you to recall how the Eastern Church, the Orthodox Church, regards Mary which is with extraordinary respect but always as a daughter of Adam. You know what that means, don't you? SINNER after the Fall, but venerated as the MOTHER of GOD. Now how can that be? Well, the Orthodox Church isn't happy with the ideas that developed that Mary was born without sin - which means without sex - which means that sex and sin are equatable. Where did *that* come from? The Orthodox Church is not happy with having Mary sort of disappear. She falls asleep. Well, we say that about people who die, don't we. "*For those who do not sorrow overmuch for those who sleep in Jesus.*" They're very, very careful to keep Mary a human being, *but* the first human being who really believes that her son is the savior and the first human being who, therefore, by her belief in her son is assumed into the godhead. Well, I kind of like that idea because that allows you to get in too. And that allows you to do what she did - men and women, regardless of gender, regardless of genitalia, regardless of sex-change operations, regardless of anything - you as a baptized human being have in that Eastern concept of Mary the opportunity to become with her a mother, a Mother of God. The Greek word is *theotokos* which is really a god-bearer. And so on Mother's Day I ask you to grasp the Orthodox Church's understanding of Mary and appropriate it for yourself - man, woman, child, young, old, rich, poor, black, white, whatever you are as a baptized Christian to believe that you are baptized into the Body of Christ so that your body might bear the Christ wherever you go and into all of your relationships with whomever you meet.

And so in the two grand ways of depicting Mary in an icon she is either *hodigitria* which means she uses one hand to point to the baby in her arms (or to the little man in her arms. Jesus is often depicted as a little man). She's pointing to the God that she has borne from her womb. Her womb has been the font which has given birth to God in the world. *Or* the other depiction, the *umilenie*, the one who caresses cheek to cheek this gorgeous baby of hers in her arms and loves him into being. That kind of Mother's Day applied to all of us seems to make way more sense than to do the kind of harm and hurt that was done to Louise Luppold by an unthinking society and a Church which was willing to often appropriate cultural celebrations at the expense of theological and liturgical ones. So I invite you today to really celebrate Mother's Day and I welcome each of you to think about the possibility you have of being a god-bearer, yourself a *theotokos*, and doing that by how you treat each other every day of the year. Don't wait for a certain Sunday in May, and don't try and get into a restaurant today if you don't have a reservation because everybody else waited. But take Mother's Day as a daily celebration, as a genuinely Catholic and Orthodox celebration, as a celebration that comes to us more frequently than even two days a year. And regard yourself as a Mother of God, a potential bearer of Christ into the world and then see what will happen with your life and the lives of those whom you touch when you expose a living God to them with your love.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.