

**Breastmilk: The Gospel of Peace**  
**A Sermon for St. John the Baptist's Episcopal Church, Minneapolis**  
**Sunday, May 14, 2017 – Mother's Day**

---

**May the blessing of the Spirit, who broods over us as a mother over her children, be with us now and forever. Amen.<sup>1</sup>**

Picture it – the year 1989 on a sunny Sunday morning at St. Andrew's Anglican Church in Harare, Zimbabwe:

“Who's that, Ma?”

“That's God, my darling.”

“But that's not what God looks like!”

“No one knows what God looks like, sweetheart, but that's God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. Now, no more questions; on our way out, shake hands with Father Forbes, thank him for his sermon, and then we'll have a nice cup of tea and a slice of cake.”

I was perplexed. My granny, who I was convinced knew everything, clearly did not know what God looked like. You see, I was seven years old, and I knew exactly what God looked like. Whoever painted that banner that hangs in St. Andrew's Anglican Church in Arcadia, Harare got the image of God completely wrong, and as a result had confused my poor granny. I had a very clear image

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://anglicanprayerbook.nz/754.html>

of what God looked like in my seven-year-old mind's eye. God certainly was not that grumpy old man with a bushy beard and fierce blue eyes that scowled at the onlooker under his enormous, bejeweled crown; who sat rotund in a rich, golden robe, upon a massive throne, holding a scepter in his right hand and planet earth in his left.

No. The image of God that I held so dearly in my heart and mind was that of a nurse. God was tall and slender. She wore a pristine nurse's uniform complete with a snow-white apron, a stylish nurse's cap with a small red cross on it, and highly polished, sensible, brown shoes. God was in perpetual motion, constantly tending to the sick, the suffering, the unwanted, and the unloved. Her hands were always lifting, scrubbing, carrying, polishing, soothing, wiping, cleaning, caressing, hugging, healing, and loving away the ugliness of this world. Her face was the picture of serenity. This was God. At the age of seven, inexplicably, I knew that God was a nurse. Not a monarch.

I am no psychologist, but I can imagine that there is some Freudian connection between my childhood image of God as a nurse and the women who raised me. Recognizing that there are excellent theological arguments

for imagining God as Mother,<sup>2</sup> I want to be sure that I also acknowledge that miscarriages; stillbirths; deaths of children; struggles with fertility, adoption, and foster care; children who are imprisoned or estranged; mothers who are neglectful, abusive, or absent; or children being raised by one or two fathers, all make the idea of Motherhood and the image of God as Mother or as Father, theologically problematic and complicated.<sup>3</sup> To come to terms with this, I found it helpful to delve into the history of Mother's Day.

What is now known as the "Mother's Day Proclamation" was penned by Julia Ward Howe in Boston in 1870 as an appeal for women to unite for peace in the world. Her powerful proclamation was a pacifist reaction to the carnage of the American Civil War and the Franco-Prussian War in her day, and I would like to read excerpts of Julia Ward Howe's prophetic words this Mother's Day, as I believe her enduring words continue to proclaim Christ's Gospel of Peace:

Arise, then, Christian women of this day! Arise, all women who have hearts, whether your baptism be that of water or of tears! Say firmly: We will not have great questions decided by irrelevant agencies. Our husbands shall 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 been able to teach them of charity, mercy and patience. We, women of one country, will be too tender of those of another country, to allow our sons to be trained to

---

<sup>2</sup> <http://ideas.time.com/2013/05/11/why-god-is-a-mother-too/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://sulfurfreejesus.wordpress.com/2017/05/10/preaching-mothers-day/>

injure theirs. From the bosom of the 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 out dishonor, nor violence vindicate possession...

... In the name of womanhood and of humanity, I earnestly ask that a general congress of women, without limit of nationality, may be appointed and held at some place deemed most convenient, and at 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.<sup>4</sup>

Charity. Mercy. Patience. Tenderness. Yes, my mother Linda Lemming did indeed teach me these virtues. And every day, I struggle to resist the unlearning of these virtues which are threatened by the carnage of oppressive, systemic injustice and evil. I don't know about you, but I am longing for these tenets of the Mother's Day Proclamation to be *realized* now. I am longing for Charity, Mercy, Patience, and Tenderness to be celebrated universally, not as rare human happenings, but as standard cultural norms. I am longing for the requirement that all leaders in seats of power be grounded in the spiritual substance of Charity, Mercy, Patience, and Tenderness.

The author of today's Epistle writing to first century Christian communities who were marginalized and abused by the demonically oppressive Roman Empire,

---

<sup>4</sup> Julia Ward Howe, "Appeal to womanhood throughout the world, ... Julia Ward Howe. Boston, September, 1870." The Library of Congress. Accessed May 10, 2017. <https://www.loc.gov/resource/rbpe.07400300>

uses a marvelous figure of speech to concretize this longing. The author employs the feminine metaphor of a mother's breast milk to communicate the power of the Word of Christ. **"Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander. Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation – if indeed you have tasted that God is good."**<sup>5</sup> This imperative command – "long for the pure, spiritual milk" – impresses upon us the requirement of rich spiritual nourishment after new birth to ensure that we grow to spiritual maturity.

Scientists today have observed that massive, intense bursts of the hormone oxytocin – affectionately known as the "trust hormone" – occur while mothers and children bond during breast-feeding; a phenomenon that enhances our human capacity to experience feelings of trust, closeness, love, intimacy, and affection.<sup>6</sup> Peter's pastoral Epistle addresses persecuted faith communities who made meaning of their suffering through the rejection, torture, and suffering of the crucified and resurrected Christ. These marginalized and abused first-century Christians would have recognized the stark contrast between the image of a

---

<sup>5</sup> 1 Peter 2:1-2.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-1036151/Breast-feeding-DOES-help-mothers-bond-babies--releases-love-hormone.html>

suckling baby being nourished by her mother's breast milk over against the brutal violence of Rome. Under the crushing evil of Roman oppression, as faithful witnesses of Christ, the first century Christians' only response to overwhelming, life-threatening, empirical oppression was to remain faithful to the Christ who, like them, suffered unjustly, but nevertheless conquered evil, sin, and death by, with, and in acts of extravagant love. In the face of our own political strife today, when we heed God's call to trust in our longing for the pure, spiritual milk of Christ's love and affection, we grow in faith. When we trust in the Charity, Mercy, Patience, and Tenderness of the Christ who was **"rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight,"**<sup>7</sup> we grow in faith. When we trust in the nourishment of Christ's Word and Sacrament, as living members of the Body of Christ, in the words of my favorite Collect from the Book of Common Prayer, we the Church shall indeed **"let the whole world see and know that things which were being cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection."**<sup>8</sup>

In today's Gospel, Jesus says, **"Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than**

---

<sup>7</sup> 1 Peter 2:4.

<sup>8</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer*, 528.

**these.”**<sup>9</sup> When I was seven years old, the works of Christ were concretized in my image of God as a nurse. Whether the image of God as Mother or God as Father resonates with the image of God you hold in your own hearts and minds or not, I invite you to ponder the Epistle’s image of a suckling child as a symbol for the nourishment of Christ’s works of love. Works of love that today’s Gospel calls us to incarnate in the world today. When we trust in Christ – that pure, spiritual milk rich in the nutrients of trust, closeness, love, and affection – we grow in spiritual maturity. Christ is resurrected through our imitation of Christ’s works of love. Grounded in God’s redeeming love in Christ, we live out our faith and our trust in the power of Charity, Mercy, Patience, and Tenderness. The "Mother's Day Proclamation" is a prophetic call to Love. Love is the way, Love is the truth, and Love is the life Christ has called us to live out abundantly. May the Love of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of Christ<sup>10</sup> this Mother’s Day and always. Amen.

---

<sup>9</sup> John 14:12.

<sup>10</sup> <http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/1928/Consecration.htm>