

May 14, 2023

“Mother Church”

Based on John 14:18-19. Jesus will not leave us orphaned.

In a beautiful description of first century gender bending, Jesus describes himself, in Matthew’s Gospel, as a mother hen, desiring to enfold her vulnerable hatchlings into the protective shelter of her wings to nurture, guide, and defend.

Indeed, at this point, after three years of preaching and teaching and healing, the entire ministry of Jesus has mirrored that of a fierce mama bear casting a vision of goodness and wholeness for all of her cubs and then placing his very own body on the line when that goodness and wholeness is threatened. Clearly, if the Gospel of Matthew has anything to say about it, the song we sing at Christmas: Jesus our Brother kind and good, could be re-written for today: Jesus our Mother nurturing and comforting.

Thirteen centuries later a woman on the brink of death in mystic’s cell in England found sufficient sustenance to resurrect her life when she envisioned the wounded and resurrected Christ of faith as “our precious Mother Jesus,” “the true Mother of life and of all things,” who “can feed us with himself . . . with the blessed sacrament.” “To the property of motherhood,” says the all healed up Julian of Norwich in her writings on the experience, “belong nature, love, wisdom, and knowledge, and this is God.”

Nature, love, wisdom, knowledge, feeding, nurturing, guiding, defending, laying her own body on the line for her cubs. The task of motherhood is vast and varied, prophetic and caring, IMPOSSIBLE, and yet utterly doable, day in, day out, one foot in front of the other, with a soul rooted in compassion and ultimately grace.

Yes, indeed, if this is what it means to be “Mother,” we have no better place to look than Jesus, himself, as our model on this Mother’s Day.

For the disciples, too, gathered as they are on the night before he dies, in our Lesson from John, Jesus has been their mother: training them, challenging them, applauding them, and now, on this last night, offering the best instruction he can on how to leave the nest. “Little children,” Jesus says, a bit earlier in his remarks, “I am with you only a little longer. . . . I give you a new commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you.”

That is easier said than done, as we all know too well. Any mother will tell you – or at least mine will – all she really wants for Mother’s Day is for her children to get along, to play nice in the sandbox, to refrain from ruffling her feathers so much as she gathers them under her wings.

I have often said the Spirit of God must be something like my mother, whose four children turned out to be (in order of our birth) a feminist Presbyterian pastor of a More Light Church, a professed atheist-turned Latin mass Catholic, a ho-hum agnostic who recently shocked his own child by admitting he probably really does believe in God, and an evangelical Baptist who, in his own community, is considered a raging liberal. Talk about a whole lot of different kinds of chicks to gather under her wings!

And yet I think that really is what Jesus has in mind when he tells us to love one another. That's how everyone will know we are his children, Jesus says. "If you have love for one another."

This is hard enough for we unruly chicks while our mothers are still alive. It can so easily fall apart once they leave us for the great beyond. Which is why Jesus assures the disciples on this night before he dies that he will not leave them orphaned, even if it feels that way when his time comes. A Mothering Spirit will remain, and that Spirit will flow through the church.

Which brings us to Mother Church, which is our theme for today, and THIS Mother Church at SPC in particular. The truth is no human mother can be everything we need or want our mothers to be. And let's face it, no human child can be everything our mothers need or want us to be. The church, too, is all too human, mucking it up and needing forgiveness, just as much as we do sometimes get it right.

We are, however, at our best, the Body of Christ, our Mother. We are, at our best, formed and re-formed by that Mothering Spirit that claims us and nurtures, especially when our own mothers cannot. We are, at our best, a place of bathing at the font and feeding at the table where the grace of our Mothering God births us and re-births us until we finally figure out how to live together in peace.