

SPR | Fifth Sunday of Easter | May 10, 2020 | The Rev. Catherine Healy

Happy Mother's Day, and happy fifth Sunday of Easter! In this video, you will probably hear some background noise brought to you by my daughter Clare, who is not in the mood to take a nap—so I apologize if there's a little bit of yelling, and if that is not a good metaphor for Mother's Day in quarantine, I don't know what is.

This has been a hard time, and for a lot of us, today is particularly hard. A lot of our normal Mother's Day customs and traditions are broken or harder to access. The comforts that we might find if we're grieving on Mother's Day are harder to reach. If you would normally take your mother out to brunch, or hand off your own children to somebody else so you can have a quiet afternoon to do whatever you want, those things are a little bit harder, too.

And yet, here we are, celebrating Mother's Day—and celebrating by reading a Gospel passage where Jesus calls God "Father" thirteen times. The "father" and "mother" language are interesting in the Gospels, because Jesus uses them in such traditional ways. He talks about God as a father when God is the protector, or the defender, or the creator; and Jesus talks about himself as a mother when he talks about being nurturing and loving, the mother hen gathering chicks under his wings.

And Jesus uses "mother" and "father" in this very traditional way, even as he embraces a radically non-traditional view of family in his own life. He's born to a young mother who's unmarried when she finds herself pregnant. He is raised by a man who is not his biological father, but claims him as his own.

And then, as he grows up, he builds his own family out of a group of friends, and he seeks out the company of other non-traditional families—like his friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, unmarried siblings who choose to build a household and a life with each other.

And in the very last moments of his life, Jesus turns to his mother Mary and his beloved disciple and says to them: "Here is your mother; here is your son." Even with his final breath, he brings them together and grafts them into a new family, so that neither one of them will be alone.

To me, this is incredibly liberating. We sometimes talk about "original family" and "chosen family" as mutually exclusive, like a life only has room for one or the other. But the life of Jesus shows us how to make room for both.

I thought about that last week, as I went shopping for Mother's Day cards for my wife, who is my co-mother, and my own mother, and my stepmother, and my mother-in-law, and the mothers of my best friends, and my aunts, who have all been like mothers to me. It felt very much like the approach that Jesus took to building his family: You start with the people God gave you, and then you grow from there.

For some people, Mother's Day is the most wonderful day of the year. For others, it's *really* hard. It's a day of celebration: of celebrating your mother, or celebrating being one. It's a day of mourning: grieving your mother, or your distance from your mother, or what might have been with her; grieving a child, or grieving the children that you never had.

And sometimes it's a day of more than one thing, because our emotions don't fit into tidy packages as often as we would like. This is another thing we learn from the company Jesus kept: that most of us are neither heroes nor villains, but just ordinary people trying to get by, who sometimes come through in the clutch and sometimes don't; who sometimes can manage to be exactly what we need them to be and sometimes can't; who may believe their love to be boundless, but whose love will sometimes falter.

That was most of the disciples. That was most of our others. That describes most of us who are mothers.

We're not perfect, no matter how hard we try.

And yet, God's love finds a way to shine through us anyway—even when we ourselves don't come through. Even when the people who love us falter or fail. This is the God whom Jesus called "Father."

A lot of ink has been spilled over the use of "Father" language for God. My own thinking is that Jesus used "Father" as shorthand for some attributes of God that he most wanted his disciples to understand: that God is steady and powerful, faithful and strong.

One of the great gifts of feminism is that our understandings of fathers and mothers have become more expansive in recent years. We finally know that fathers are allowed to be nurturing, that mothers are allowed to be strong. No single image or metaphor can ever capture the depth of God's love for us. I think it's beautiful to pray to God as a father. I also think it's beautiful to pray to God as a mother, or as a creator, an author, an artist.

What Jesus is trying to do in John is not to hammer you over the head with patriarchal language, but to give you one useful image to show you who God is: that there is a creative and protective and powerful force in the universe, a force for good that is personal, that knows each of us—and that through Jesus we can draw closer to the source of that goodness and power. That's where I think he's going with "No one comes to the Father except through me."

So be well, and take heart, and open your heart in prayer. Give thanks on this day for all those whom you've had the chance to mother, or who have been mother figures for you. Give yourself grace to feel whatever you're feeling without shame on this day. Do remember that we're not going to be in quarantine forever. And take a chance on letting yourself talk to, and listen to, the God who loves you so much, who has already prepared a place for you.