



MOTHERING FOR THE THIRD MILLENNIUM
Acts 9:36-43

Today is Mother's Day. It is the day we celebrate motherhood – and the day we descend on Mom!

Actually mothers and women in general have been an integral part of the Christian church since its very beginning. We also know the great witness of Sarah, Ruth, and Deborah in the Old Testament as well.

This day we know and call Mother's Day has deep roots in the Methodist Episcopal Church and the great state of Pennsylvania. A devout Methodist laywoman by the name of Anna M. Jarvis had seen the strength of Christian character and the richness of faith deeply alive in her own mother Anna Marie Reeves Jarvis. Her mother's faith was both deeply personal but yet had a tremendous and powerful public witness. She was the Light of the World and the Salt of the Earth in a very difficult time to live in our great nation. Her mother was the founder of the Mother's Day Work Clubs. These clubs spread throughout the area. During the Civil War, the clubs acted as neutral agents, serving the soldiers of both sides. This was a time of personal tragedy for Anna, as she watched eight of her twelve children die before reaching adulthood.

Near the end of the war, Anna organized a Mother's Friendship Day at the courthouse to bring people of both sides together in peace. Many were afraid the event would backfire and lead to violence, but the event was peaceful and so successful that it was repeated for many years.

This great woman of faith and charity died on May 9, 1905. When Anna was alive her daughter heard her say more than once – she wished someone would start a special day to honor mothers.

So soon after her mother's death she dedicated her life to fulfilling this desire of her beloved mother. She began a campaign of writing letters and hit the speaking circuit. The idea quickly found support – and the grassroots population of the American people rose up in great numbers.

The first Mother's Day sermon was preached at the Andrews Methodist church in Grafton, W. Virginia on May 10, 1907. Anna Jarvis had a relationship with Old St. George's Church in Philadelphia, Pa. By 1908, the city of Philadelphia had its first official Mother's Day celebration and by 1910 the great state of Pennsylvania made it an

official holiday. The movement continued to garner strength. Finally in 1914 – President Woodrow Wilson proclaimed that the second Sunday in May should be celebrated as Mother’s Day. So our nation and our denomination have deep roots in this day.

Now two little known facts. First in 1923, Anna Jarvis was so disappointed that Mother’s Day became commercialized that she filed a lawsuit to stop a Mother’s Day festival. She said “I wanted this day to be a day of honor and sentiment – not profit!” Secondly, Anna Jarvis never married – and never was a biological mother.

So it’s right and proper that we talk and spend time with the biblical concept of mothering and being a godly mother. Let me explain what I mean by mothering – and being a godly mother. Being a mother is more than the biological ability to produce children. The word has a surplus of meaning. It is both a noun and a verb.

In one of the first churches I served we were discussing at an Education meeting how we wanted to celebrate Mother’s Day. I shared how in the church where I was raised in Newark, New Jersey, we would give a rose to the following women:

- A. The oldest mother present
- B. The youngest mother (who most recently gave birth to a child)
- C. The mother with the most children present that day
- D. The grandmother with the most grandchildren present.

Then we would have all the mothers stand and they would get a potted plant.

However, one of the members on the committee shared this insight. What about Miss Emma Robinson? She had taught the nursery class for 38 years. She had nurtured and mothered more children than anybody in the church. Some of the adults on the committee told how important she had been to them in their growth and development in the faith. While she had never been a biological mother – her positive Christian imprint was on almost every child in that church. The strength of character – and the richness of faith were so deeply alive in her life and walk with God. Pastors had come and gone – but she was an anchor for that church.

Today, I want to share with you about a little known woman in the New Testament by the name of Dorcas. Her witness and testimony is fitting for all women of faith whether they are biological mothers or not. She is a worthy role model for all. She is positive proof that the Easter story continues in the lives of many people. One of the reasons we miss this biblical account – is that it follows perhaps one of the most famous conversions of all – the Apostle Paul in chapter 9. However, she is also a powerful witness to the power of the resurrection at work in her life.

We read in the latter part of **verse 36** “She was full of good works and charity.”¹ This is quite a witness and legacy to leave behind. I know a lot of people who are full of it – but not necessarily good works and charity.

We further read in **verse 37** she becomes ill and dies. Well the First United Methodist Church of Joppa is overwhelmed with grief. We know from **verse 39** she was quite a seamstress and garment maker. Some of the items she had made were displayed as her body laid in state until Peter the Apostle could come to conduct the funeral and provide pastoral care for the church family.

Her death leaves an enormous gap² in the life of that congregation. Her death is deeply felt because her life has made such a difference in the lives of so many.³ Her death is so important that perhaps the best known disciple – Peter – comes to preach her funeral service.

After Peter had greeted the fellow believers for awhile – he asks for some special moments along to be in prayer before he conducts the funeral service. Peter had been present when Jesus raised from the dead the daughter of Jairus as recorded in **Mark 5:21-43**. With that event empowering his memory – he goes to the Lord in prayer. Somewhere in that prayer – Peter realizes that God has decided to call off this funeral – and allow Dorcas to live longer doing her works of love and charity.

Here a simple woman in the eyes of the male-dominated culture – who is nobody to many – is a recipient of God’s grace and new life. This woman’s life and work was considered valuable and a great treasure for the community of faith. She is a role model for all in the church – male and female – to emulate and incarnate in us. Dorcas simply shared her faith and gave her life away. In the Christian faith what you give away never returns void or empty – because you are participating in the eternal purposes of God.

On Monday, I had my semi-annual checkup at my doctor’s office in Frackville. Like you, I began to read the magazines. One of them had an article talking about the changing face of motherhood as we live in the 21st century. It talked about the challenge of careers, blended families, and how that affects relationships with men and children. As I read the article I thought to myself – don’t write off motherhood too fast. Don’t hold the funeral service yet. If motherhood and mothering is of God – from God – and accountable to God – this trend will also fade and motherhood will return to its original focus and be a mighty force for God and for the development of faith.

A gentleman by the name of John Wayne Schlatter shared how it was the wisdom of his mother that taught him about life and death. After his mother died – while going through her papers he found this piece of paper with this message scribbled in her own handwriting. He read it at her funeral. I share it today:

“When I die – give what is left of me to children.
If you need to cry – cry for others walking beside you.

Put your arms around anyone and
give them what you need to give me.
I want to leave you with something –
something better than words or sounds.
Look for me in the people
I have known and loved.
And if you cannot live without me –
then let me live on in your eyes –
your mind – and your acts of kindness.
You can love me most by letting hands touch hands –
and letting go of children that need to be free.
Love does not die – people do.
So when all that is left of me is love
Give me away.”

So in closing today – let me say it has never been easy to be a mother – or to share the gift of mothering with others – whether in the first millennium or the third millennium. However, Abraham Lincoln, our 16th President, was absolutely correct when he wrote “**No man is poor who had a godly mother.**”

So ladies of EUMC – continue to strengthen your Christian character as God’s word reveals – and may the Easter story be alive in you as you bring hope and new life to your children – and the children entrusted to your care outside your biological family. Like Dorcas, may you be filled with good works and charity – and our church will be full of the richness of Christian faith for years to come.

Amen and amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz
May 10, 2009 Mother’s Day
All Rights Reserved – Copyrighted 5-10-09

ENDNOTES

¹ RSV Acts 9:36.

²“**Preaching Through the Christian Year, YEAR C,**” Trinity Press, Valley Forge, PA, 1994, page 243.

³Ibid, page 245.