

“Different Hungers, Different Fruit”

John 14:1-7, 15-20, 27; Galatians 5:22-26 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – May 10, 2020

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might open our hearts to your Spirit, to receive what we need and give what we can. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

I want to talk about Mother's Day today. Or more accurately, since you know I don't really want to talk about Mother's Day, I should say that I want to talk about Mother's Day as an analogy. But maybe some of you don't know that I don't want to talk about Mother's Day, so I should clarify that not wanting to talk about Mother's Day is sort of at the heart of the analogy, so I will definitely be explaining that part too. Some of you have known or suspected for years that I am reluctant to have us make a big deal of Mother's Day at church. This has been upsetting for some of you, I know, and I'm sorry about that. I am grateful for your patience with me as we have negotiated this dance every year. The thing is – it's not just me.

Because I am a woman who has chosen not to have children – which you may or may not have known I am – one might assume that my lack of enthusiasm about the holiday stems from a basic dismissal of the importance and value of motherhood. Please let me assure you that is not the case. I am in awe of mothers – mothers of young children, mothers of teenagers, mothers of children struggling with addiction, mothers of adult children who barely have time for you anymore, mothers with outside-the-home jobs, working-in-the-home mothers, adoptive mothers, foster

mothers, young mothers, old mothers, good mothers, even bad mothers. It's a terrifying and incredible you are doing, and in case you don't ever stop to take a moment and recognize how amazing it is, that's one good use of Mother's Day. Those are whole other people you're ushering into the world. It's like you started a project that was initially quite small and often even adorable, and then it grew increasingly out of your control, and suddenly, there it went – a full-grown human being! Motherhood is amazing and admirable. It's exhausting and beautiful and hard. I see you. You are a wonder and a marvel. If only we could have a day to help you remember how valuable your mothering is.

I mean, we can. And we do. But unfortunately, that isn't all this holiday does. Mother's Day can be that, but when we try to take it beyond the boundaries of the relationships where it truly is a celebration, it brings a LOT of baggage. There is simply no way around this. When we pull a holiday intended to honor private relationships into the public sphere, we immediately bump into a bunch of other dynamics that are not causes for celebration. Because this is really just an analogy, I don't want to get into all the details, but here is a quick list of people who may find a Mother's Day celebration in the context of worship uncomfortable: people who have longed to become mothers but haven't been able to, whether because of infertility, miscarriage, or life situations that didn't make it possible; people whose mothers were absent or abusive or just not that great at mothering; people whose mothers are suffering with dementia and don't remember their names; people who have chosen

not to have children and have heard “You just don’t know real love till you have your own kids” one too many times; people who have lost their mothers or their children to death or addiction or estrangement.

There is no good way around this baggage. If we want to avoid implying that motherhood is the most valuable choice for a woman by giving flowers to all the women, we can instead give the impression that it’s because of your potential to be a mother that you’re being included (despite the fact that you failed to live up to that potential!). If we give flowers to everyone because “everyone has a mother!” we end up driving home painful realities for those who didn’t really have mothers worth remembering. There is simply no way to do this as a collective experience that doesn’t poke hard on somebody’s tender spots. Which is unfortunate, because, as I mentioned earlier, mothering is an awesome and amazingly hard thing to do, and it goes on for a really long time, and I’m shocked anyone does it at all, quite frankly, so there should be a way to honor that.

But as I said at the beginning, this isn’t really about Mother’s Day; it’s about Mother’s Day as an analogy. Because I realized that this difficulty we have in sharing Mother’s Day – and marking it and celebrating it together and all the baggage that comes along with doing that – is not that different from some of the dynamics of this season of pandemic quarantine we’re going through right now. Indeed, the connection is even stronger than you might imagine, because our stay-home orders have exacerbated some of the issues that make mothering harder than it has to be.

Studies have already been done¹ showing that women are doing way more of the extra labor required to make households function during this time than their male partners, whether it's cooking, cleaning, childcare, or home-schooling. This is not surprising, given that women were already doing more of those things in the vast majority of households. It's also not surprising that many men feel they're doing a lot more of it than they're really doing, as studies have shown this overestimation of effort is a common pattern. Such realities prompted one writer to post an article titled "All I Want for Mother's Day Is an Equitable Division of Labor," in which she offers women 10 steps for re-negotiating who does what in their households.²

The thing about Mother's Day and quarantine is that they both get us, as the kids might say, "right in the feels". They poke and wrench us right in the most tender, vulnerable soft spots of our souls, and our reactions to anything that rubs us the wrong way are often irrational and extreme. The truth is that our situations within this shared pandemic quarantine are as varied as our relationships with our mothers and just as emotionally laden. And because we're feeling threatened and overwhelmed, we're often having trouble realizing that others are going through this very differently than we are, just as the overly sentimental approach the church has often taken to Mother's Day obscures the diversity of experience in the room.

¹ https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/06/upshot/pandemic-chores-homeschooling-gender.html?campaign_id=9&emc=edit_nn_20200507&instance_id=18281&nl=the-morning®i_id=122183084&segment_id=26779&te=1&user_id=890813a72927da2011672ef4c1a94a0c&fbclid=IwAR3DR3RHClQoj5m363JMb2KNzvKHkpClHq1a_ZDGL3z71gPmQHsApiexpQ

² https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/all_i_want_for_mothers_day_is_an_equitable_division_of_labor?fbclid=IwAR3X09Y1h5gIVdgaqawDgKSmzzwka3pF4uibUan3cVbMNkh1_dwJ-irk0Nc

Do you remember back when we were first told to stay home, and there was a lot of talk about what to do with all your free time, as if everyone suddenly had nothing to do? I will admit, it took me a week or so to figure out that all those articles weren't really for me. I had plenty to do, I just had to figure out how to do it differently, which was a job all on its own. In the meantime, I completed an entire jigsaw puzzle, a book, and a total re-watch of both seasons of "Dark". But you know what? Within a couple of weeks, that dominant narrative about how we were all sleeping in till noon, wearing pajamas all day, and losing track of what day it was got a little irritating. That has not been my reality. And it hasn't been the reality of those with children now home all day, or those who are working in grocery stores, or those with children who are also expected to show up for work at grocery stores. It hasn't been the reality for those who have lost their jobs, who can't sleep in because their kids are waking up hungry. It hasn't been the reality for health care workers, whether they're scientists working on treatment possibilities or aides in care facilities. It is silly and short-sighted – and worse, hurtful – to pretend that we're all going through this pandemic in similar ways.

I know no one personally who has died from Covid-19. But my African-American colleagues, pastors all over the country, are noting in their Facebook posts how every day they're hearing of folks from their communities who have passed because of it. Some of us are drowning in loneliness, and some of us are going mad for lack of a single moment of solitude in houses full of family. Why is it that we're

so eager to adopt a single narrative for experiences that are diverse beyond our imagining? Sometimes, as I did, we even buy into a narrative that isn't true for us, playing along because we wish it were true, or simply because it's what everyone else says is happening.

This longing for a standard experience, a one-size-fits-all explanation for our circumstances is kind of what Paul was trying to talk the Galatians out of. They had been influenced by others who were insisting the new Christians should also have to follow the Jewish law; otherwise everything would be chaos, right? But no, Paul teaches otherwise. Rather than a strict set of rules for how to do things, what the church needed to do was seek the guidance of the Spirit.

And here's what is so interesting to me about this: when we seek the Spirit, Paul says, the Spirit bears fruit, and not just one fruit, but many! Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. It's almost as if Paul understands that we don't all need the same nourishment to satisfy the hungers of our souls. Different people, different days, different histories – different hungers. The Spirit is ready to provide, not with a one-size-fits-most solution, but with the spiritual food you need.

It's so interesting to me, when we study this passage in small groups, which fruit different people select as their need. Patience comes up a lot, but then you'll hear a few ask for peace or kindness. Gentleness is always the one that gets me. Self-control might be more popular these days than it normally is. But even if there's

nothing on this list that speaks to you, there are other options in the back! The list is “illustrative rather than comprehensive,” Bible scholar Richard B. Hays writes. There is something here for you, because God understands what we often struggle to see: that each of us is moving through the world in our own way, and the nourishment we each need will vary.

Mother’s Day and pandemic can uncover the tender places in our hearts. We long for words of comfort like the ones Jesus shares in John 14. We want to know that we will not be left orphaned, that God is abiding with us, that we can be together with Jesus. We want our hearts not to be troubled or afraid. But too often, our fear and worry push us into ourselves instead of toward God. We end up like the Galatians, “competing against one another, envying one another.” We compare our children, our parenting, our relationships with our mothers or our mothers-in-law, our capacity to follow the rules or break them, and we end up biting and devouring each other, just as Paul warned about in verse 15 of this same chapter.

What if instead, we could let everyone have the fruit they need? What if, instead, we could seek the Spirit together, and rejoice together whenever anyone receives the nourishment they needed? Whether it’s about what kind of baggage we’re carrying into Mother’s Day, or how we’re holding ourselves together in this strange and awful time, or just how we move through life, should it ever “get back to normal,” the point is that we all need the same thing, but in different flavors. We need to be loved for who we are, each of us a unique creation, not because of how

well we meet impossible, unhelpful expectations. We need to know that our path is worthy, even though others have taken other paths. We need to know that the bad things that happened to us weren't punishment for something we did and that we are not responsible for other people's failures to love us and support us. We need the unconditional love of God, who knows us better than we know ourselves and exults in every tiny detail of our uniqueness, God who abides with us and in us and makes a room just for us.

Whether what we need tastes like the peaches of patience or the strawberries of joy will depend on how our palate has been formed throughout our lives. Whether we're craving the mangoes of gentleness or the grapefruit of self-control, the Spirit is here for us, offering us – each of us – exactly what we need. There is no need for us humans to butt in and limit the menu. Why would we insist on only one flavor, when the cravings of our hearts are so diverse? Those who are receiving the bananas of generosity can help those with extra baggage carry their load. Those who are overflowing with the lemons of faithfulness can help steady those who are wavering their way forward. The Spirit wills for us abundance – rich, diverse abundance! That is how we know the Spirit is abiding in our midst, when the gifts that we need are the ones others are called to share and the blessings we have in excess are the gifts our neighbors need. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid: the Spirit's tree is ripe for picking, and the nourishment your soul longs for is there to be found. Hallelujah and Amen.