

Two Stories for Mothers' Day

I don't believe it's ever been done, but if you were to take a poll of members of the clergy in America, cutting clear across denominational and theological lines, and ask what is the sermon topic you most prefer to avoid, the winner, in all likelihood, would be a sermon about mothers on Mothers' Day.

Why this is so may not seem all that apparent at first. How can you go wrong talking about mothers? Well, let me count the ways: Praise mothers too much and too uncritically and you invite flak from anyone who has some unpleasant "mommy issues," which they do not want to be reminded of unless they're discussing them with their therapist. But if you speak too much to such "mommy issues" then you just might hear it from those who don't have them because *their* mothers were just fine, thank you very much. And what about those women who by choice or circumstance are not mothers? Are you dissing them by extolling the virtues of motherhood? And how about those moms who are less than thrilled at being moms, or feel they don't quite cut it as a mother, and don't want to hear about how great it all is? And on it goes.

What may seem like a very safe subject on the surface becomes, upon closer inspection, a veritable mine field. So for me the path of least resistance is to skip the Mothers' Day sermon altogether, and work in a few broad-based motherly tributes at other places in the service. This is the road I generally take on the second Sunday in May. But today I'm taking the road less traveled, and we'll see where it takes us.

Where it will mostly take us is into history, and to two sometimes competing stories about the origins of Mothers' Day. They are the stories of two very different women when it comes to their social status, their level of education, and their place in history. But they also have points of convergence. The women are Julia Ward Howe and Anna Marie Jarvis. Their pictures are on the cover of your Order of Service for today. They're each credited with the founding of Mother's Day, and they each deserve some of the credit, with neither of them getting it all.

Seeing as how we are a UU congregation, I'm guessing that the name of Julie Ward Howe has more name recognition than Anna Jarvis, so we'll start there. Julia Ward was born in 1819 to a New York City family of comfort and privilege. Her father was a wealthy banker. In her teenage years Julia

rebelled against the Calvinist Christianity that pervaded her home and took a more liberal turn. At age 21 she married Samuel Gridley Howe, a Boston physician and prominent Unitarian; and, like Julia's father, a man of means.

Julia and Samuel became part of the Transcendentalist circle with Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thoreau, the Alcotts, etc. in the pre-Civil War era. They were also greatly influenced by the preaching of Unitarian minister and fierce Abolitionist, Rev. Theodore Parker.

By the time the Civil War broke out both Samuel and Julia were involved in the work of the Sanitary Commission—which later became the American Red Cross—in tending to the war wounded. It was while visiting a Union soldiers' encampment near Washington, and seeing the Union soldiers preparing for battle, that moved Julia Ward Howe to write the words to "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." It reflected her strong abolitionist sentiments. The Lord Himself, as she wrote it, was behind the Union cause and was "trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored" while wielding "His terrible swift sword" and loosening "fateful lightening."

But as the war went on and Julia become more involved in the treatment of the wounded and psychologically damaged soldiers she gained another perspective on warfare that was considerably less exalted than what she'd portrayed in her best known work. She became an ardent a peace activist, and advocate for women's suffrage. It was these combined passions that led her, in the latter years of her life, to rally women—mothers and otherwise—to the cause of international peace.

It was out of these efforts that the Julia Ward Howe version of Mothers' Day came about. In 1870 an International Peace Conference was held in London, and Julia wrote a proclamation she wanted to read at it. The conference organizers prevented her from doing so, however, because she was a woman. Being for world peace was all well and good; but it was the men, apparently, who were going to bring it about. (Never mind that it was men—by and large—who had been the ones who'd waged most, if not all, of humanity's wars. We can't have a woman in here, so they reasoned, telling us how to make peace.)

Mrs. Howe's was not one to be put off. Her response was to show up in London anyway, rent her own hall, and issue her Proclamation, which read, in part: "Arise all women who have hearts...Our husbands will not come to

us reeking of carnage for [our] applause. Our sons will not be taken from us to unlearn all we have taught them of charity, mercy, and patience. We, the women of one country will not (have) those of another country allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs.”

And in counterpoint language to her best know work she wrote: “Disarm! Disarm! The sword of murder is not the balance of justice.” Interesting... now the “terrible swift sword” has become the “sword of murder.”

Julia Ward Howe issued this Proclamation on June 2, 1870 and called for an International Mothers’ Day of Peace, which she envisioned as an annual international peace festival. Following the 1870 conference, the June 2nd date was celebrated in some fashion in some American cities in the manner that Mrs. Howe had called for. Its sentiments, at least in some quarters, find expression in our current Mothers’ Day observances.

But for the events that led more directly to Mothers’ Day as we now have it we have to turn to our second story.

Story Two is about a woman named Anna Jarvis. Actually it’s about two women with that same name, a mother and a daughter. It is the daughter whose picture is on your Order of Service. But we’ll start with the elder Anna. She grew up in Appalachia, in the western mountainous country in what was then the State of Virginia. Her husband was a Methodist country preacher named Granville Jarvis. Anna Jarvis lived roughly at the same time as Julie Ward Howe. But she was a world away—both geographically and in terms of class and stature—from the world of Julia Howe.

Anna became concerned about the health and sanitary conditions in the little Appalachian towns in which she and her husband lived as he was moved from one church to another. Mrs. Jarvis—the minister’s wife—organized what she called Mothers’ Day Work Clubs in the towns where her husband had a pastorate. These clubs raised money for medicine, hired women to work for families in which the mothers suffered from tuberculosis. Her efforts also provided for the inspection of bottled milk and food to see how safe they were for consumption—especially for children.

Anna and Granville lost four of their twelve children to childhood diseases, and this fueled her passion to do what she could to save other parents from

the agony and distress she and her husband experienced when some of their children died.

Then the Civil War came. As was the case with Julia Ward Howe, Anna Jarvis' life was also markedly shaped by that conflict.

We take a time-out now for a brief interlude of West Virginia history. As the Civil War progressed, the people living in the western hill country of the State of Virginia came to see that their leanings were more with the Union than with the Confederacy. The folks in northwestern Virginia were mostly dirt farmers scratching out whatever living they could from the land. Slavery was not as common in the northwestern part of the State. Fighting for an institution, and for a way of life, that had little bearing on their lives, increasingly made little sense. So in the course of the Civil War the western Virginians seceded from the Secessionist State of Virginia and became a Union State, The State of West Virginia.

Back to Anna Jarvis the elder: When the Civil War ended she was living in the small town of Grafton in what had become the State of West Virginia, and where her husband was the minister of the local Methodist Church. Since that part of the country had changed sides during the Civil War, there were soldiers returning who had fought on opposite sides in the War; and this generated a fair amount of conflict and tension within their communities. Anna Jarvis decided to do something about it.

In the summer of 1865, one year after the War ended, she organized in Grafton a Mother's Friendship Day. Quaint as the name may sound, the objective was to bring together the soldiers who had fought on opposite sides in the Civil War in the hope that some reconciliation could be found, and that they could all get on with their lives. Some feared there would be fights and violence, but the event was a success and Mother's Friendship Day became an annual event in that part of West Virginia for several years hence. As did Julia Ward Howe, Mrs. Jarvis invoked the name "Mother's Day" as a way of promoting peace and reconciliation for the returning veterans of the Civil War.

After Anna's husband died she moved to Philadelphia to live with one of her daughters. This would be *daughter* Anna. Anna Senior died in 1905. Two years later daughter Anna traveled from her home in Philadelphia to Grafton to hold a memorial tribute for her deceased mother at the Grafton Methodist

Church. Following that service Daughter Anna began her crusade for an official, nationally recognized Mothers' Day. She never had any children of her own and had never married. The founder of Mothers Day was not a mother herself. Still, she had a lot of love and admiration for her mother whom she wanted to see honored.

After six years of daughter Anna Jarvis' working on members of Congress, President Woodrow Wilson signed a Congressional Proclamation designating Mothers' Day as an official holiday to be celebrated on the second Sunday of May. The next time you are passing through Grafton, West Virginia you can check out the plaque on the Methodist Church proclaiming that the first official Mothers' Day observance was held there on May 12 of 1907.

I know the Julie Ward Howe school of Mothers' Day advocates for the June 2, 1870 date, when Mrs. Howe issued her Peace Proclamation. The Anna Marie Jarvis school of Mothers' Day holds that the official date is the second Sunday in May thanks to the efforts of Miss Jarvis. But instead of having that argument, let's quickly take a closer look at these two stories. Mrs. Howe and Mrs. Jarvis never met; but their stories have a certain kind of confluence.

I say that because in considering these two women it's the contrasts that are most often noted: The peace and social justice advocate Julie Ward Howe attempting to rally mothers to a good and righteous cause, versus the gushy, mushy flowers and cards holiday that has grown out of Anna Jarvis' desire to honor her mother. But that's too superficial; and it's a false dichotomy. For one thing, Miss Jarvis—in her final years before her death in 1948—became frustrated and disillusioned with what had happened to the holiday she'd worked so hard to bring about. Her objective had been not just to honor her mother—critically important as that was to her—but to also celebrate her mother's humanitarian and reconciliation efforts in the little West Virginia communities where she lived.

Miss Jarvis, in fact, became so upset with the commercialization sentimentalizing of what she regarded as "her holiday" that she once referred to Mothers' Day cards as "a poor excuse for the letter you are too lazy to write." OK, yes, I sent my 91 year old West Virginia mother a card.

Be that as it may, here's the common message I take from these two stories: Both Julie Ward Howe and the elder Anna Jarvis were very loving and devoted mothers to their children; for this they, and all mothers, deserve recognition and respect. In Mrs. Jarvis' case her love and devotion was accompanied by the pain of losing several of her children in their early years—a pain no parent should ever have to experience, even though many do.

Consider these two stories as well as a lesson in classism: Because of her social standing, and her access to some of the upper reaches of her society and culture, Julie Ward Howe could command a larger hearing and gain a greater response for her efforts. She came from privilege, and maintained that station throughout her life. To her great credit, of course, she used her privileged station in life to advance various causes for social justice.

She could issue a Proclamation and have it heard and printed and widely distributed. She was a published poet, author of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” and the matriarch of a wealthy and prestigious Boston family. She could afford to travel to London and rent out her own lecture hall. She did good where she could with the resources she had at hand—which in her case were considerable resources indeed.

Now, consider the elder Mrs. Anna Jarvis. She did not have the platform or the standing or the prestige that Julie Ward Howe did. She was a minister's wife living in small Appalachian villages in the mid-to-late nineteenth century. She used the station in life she had in those small towns to bring about a measure of healing and reconciliation following the Civil War. She, too, did good where she could with the resources she had.

As I say, there is an element of classism in play if we hold up Mrs. Howe and diminish Mrs. Jarvis. This is not a topic for today, but seeing as how we now have another year together, I want to use some of that time for us to hopefully gain a heightened awareness of how matters of class and race are intertwined—even as they each have their own distinct particularities. File that for future reference.

Finally, then, both Julie Ward Howe and Anna Marie Jarvis drew upon their faith communities to find inspiration and guidance for their good works. For Julie Ward Howe it was the sermons of her Unitarian minister, Rev.

Theodore Parker, who portrayed Jesus as a radical social reformer of his day. Rev. Parker urged his hearers to follow that example.

I know considerably less about the theology and preaching of the Rev. Granville Jarvis. I know that he did not have the Harvard education that Rev. Parker did; none of those Appalachian mountain preachers did. So I can only guess that in the stories of how Jesus took his ministry of teaching and healing and compassion to the common, underclass folk of his day—that Mrs. Jarvis took her cue from them for her own compassionate work with the common and struggling folk of her day.

What these two women—from widely differing stations in life—had in common, then, was a vision and a desire for a reconciled human family. This is the vision we should all be striving towards in whatever great or small ways we can, using whatever means and resources are available to us.

This is also the vision we should be setting before our children; “our children” in the broadest sense of the word. We each have our chance to have an impact upon the generations of our day, and upon the generations that come of age after us, even as did the two women whose lives we honor this morning. They each in their own way tended their gardens well, and treated them as “cradles for humanity.” Let’s sing about that in our closing hymn: “Earth Was Given as a Garden.”

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May 14, 2017