

Family Memories

Mothers' Day 2006

Well, let me begin by simply saying **Happy Mothers' Day!** Having said that, I know that many congregations try on this Sunday to place the focus not just on mothers but on the wider family. Nevertheless, this day, the second Sunday in May, remains embedded in our culture at least, as decidedly Mothers' Day.

Some worshipers this morning may not be aware that there are a number of origins of Mothers' Day, the oldest one going back to 1870 when Julia Ward Howe, better known as the writer of the words to The Battle Hymn of the Republic, actually invented Mothers' Day. She did so as a lasting protest against the sort of terrible carnage she had witnessed while tending the wounded in the American Civil War. She called together a general congress of women, from countries all over the world, who would gather to promote the alliance of the different countries. Her cry was:

"Arise, all women who have hearts. Say firmly: we women of one country will be too tender to those of another country to allow our sons to injure theirs."

Because of her appeal, there started to gather a group of women who had the will and the heart to be nurturers of peace.

Another tradition goes back about a hundred years when a woman named Anna Jarvis was concerned about the tendency of children, when they had grown up and had moved away from home, to fail to visit their parents or send them letters. So she identified a day each year to remember them, especially mothers.

It was the same concern that prompted a Mrs. J. Dowd, to start Fathers' Day. She came from a single-parent family whose father had raised their family alone, after their Mothers' death. For some reason the church has never really put a great deal of focus on Father's Day, and so, for the last 40 years or so, many denominations have concentrated on the family instead of only mothers. Such a focus is a way of acknowledging the importance of the family in shaping our faith and values. So, no matter who we are, whether we are young or old, single or separated, married or in partnership, we all come from families.

For some, the family experience has been quite destructive. For others, it has been a setting which has sustained us in good times and in bad. And here in this context, however restless or halting our discipleship may be, we are also part of a wider family of faith, rooted in biblical story, empowered by all embracing Spirit that never lets us go. We are part of a family of faith which not only spans the globe but also the ages.

Now, most of the time when people come to be part of our worship hour, at least during the preaching moment, they are expected to listen very carefully, to think very hard, as they concentrate on the complex structure of the sermon as it unfolds in all its wonder, power and beauty! [Says he humbly]

But not today. Today, you are permitted to let your mind wander, to "wool gather". For instead of your usual sermon I'm choosing this morning to share some random and not so random thoughts about my own family memories. I should add that one of the assumptions at work here is an undergirding conviction that at its heart most theology, like most fiction, is essentially autobiography. Thus, when you and I engage in the discipline of remembering our past, and in this case, within the

context of family, what we are doing is identifying particular events or relationships, questions or experiences, that have shaped our beliefs, our hopes and our fears.

As I tell you my story, let the telling bode you to journey back through your own story. So relax... don't go sleep mind you, breath deep and remember.

For me, home was 99 Saint Marie St. in Hull, the corner of Fortier, a rectangular shaped three-bedroom bungalow with a tin roof built in the early 1950s. We were on the edge of town near what was called Canada Cement. You could always see the giant smokestack -- -- a chimney which is no more. Late at night, you could hear the shunting steam locomotives at Canada Packers as they broke the stillness of the air -- -- a noise which is no longer heard. I can still smell the smell!

Yesterday, it seems like yesterday.

I live with my older sister June, my mother, my father and my grandmother... whom I come to think likes my sister better than me. My parents both work and we the children are cared for after school by Gran. My parents are not much to socialize. My sister and I fight a fair bit. Our clothes are plain. I wear ugly glasses at a very young age. I get teased a lot but at least my glasses protect me from getting into fights. After all, how can you hit someone in the face who is wearing glasses?

I find a corner in the living room that is my spot, behind a black wooden rocker, a worn leather footstool always propping up my head (can I still smell that dry leather?) I often listen to the radio, often listening to the Lone Ranger, yes and

even Maggie Muggins and later many other programs on television. It is a place for me to dream, to think, to escape. Can it be that that footstool is no more?

Yesterday, it seems like yesterday.

It is Mothers' Day, early Sunday morning, and it seems like everyone in the neighbourhood is out in the garden cutting flowers for the children to bring to church. We walk to the bus and I walk two steps behind my parents, carrying a handful of tulips -- I detest it. We bring them to the front as part of the service at the church St. James Anglican. The minister, Cannon Earle, looks so pleased and proud as all of us come marching down the aisle. Little does he know that I can't wait to get rid of my bouquet.

Yesterday it seems like yesterday.

My mother is crying. Granny is in the next room. The doctor leaves the house. I do not want to lose her. It is not right, it's not true - she is alive now. I tell my mother - - "The doctor will be wrong". Before the final day my grandmother calls me to her bedside, takes my hand and tells me that there is nothing to fear in dying. She also asks me to always trust God and not to be afraid.

It is a few years later, my father rushes in the back door. I hear him speak in quiet tones to my mother that a neighbour up the street has just been found dead. It is the father of a boy my age who sometimes plays with me. I learned later that they found him in his car, engine running, garage door closed. I find myself thinking -- - - 'how is it that my grandmother can have no fear of death and my friend's father have such a fear of life?'

Yesterday, it seems like yesterday.

My father sits beside me in church. He snores so loud. I see classmates turn and snicker. I nudge him quickly. We've talked about this before. He smiles but continues on as always. His arm rests briefly on my shoulder. I wonder why he doesn't hug me more often? I can count the times he does so.

Yesterday, it seems like yesterday.

Happy times and sad times, scary times, and puzzling times, exciting times and boring times, remembered time and erased time. Just a house, but still my house. Just a family, but still my family. My mother, my father, my sister, my grandmother my dog, and my cat, my school, my church, my neighbourhood. Am I all of that or only what I remember? So I search for where I've been. But will it give me clues to where I'm going?

Yesterday, it seems like yesterday.

Yesterday -- it was yesterday, I sat with my own family. The funny words 'my own'. Are they really mine -- to possess, to direct? Do I own them -- live through them, control their thoughts, their values their loyalties? What does it mean to be a family? Who and what is this family we call our own, into which we come by birth, adoption or marriage. What does it mean to bear a name, a name out of the many borne by those before us -- telling who we are, fixing us in time and space? What does it mean to love someone... a child, parents, friends, near or distant, openly or secretly, spouse, brother, sister? Does it mean to own one? To dominate?

To shelter? Or does it mean to risk, to let go, to free? Is this family which limits, hedges us about, determines growth in attitude as rigidly as sex and size? Or is it that from which we spring, to make our way, sometimes with others, sometimes alone, in this life in which we are all pilgrims?

Today will seem like yesterday, tomorrow.

Our children in some distant world beyond imagining will tell the story of their family, may even remember visiting our homes. They will wrestle with the meaning of their family, feeling both the private and public pains of name, sensing the good and the bad, including genes that weaken us-- attitudes that left them less than they would want to be, giving them shelter and protection when perhaps they needed to be shaken and exposed.

Today will seem like yesterday, tomorrow.

Someone will struggle to recall a cemetery where our ashes lie. They will wonder what it was that we were really like, what guilt burdened us, what dreams empowered us? They will stand before the mystery of who they are, and where they come from, and will grieve for and/or celebrate the one who went before them and who had a part in making them who they are -- mothers, fathers, great great grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins... **family**.

Today, today we are a family.

Not linked by genes or common traits, but by a name, the name of Christ. We share a common memory of those before us, in the face of Sarah ,Abraham, of Mary and

Matthew, our mothers and our fathers. We recall their deeds, their songs, their myths and symbols. And in them we recognize the special stories about God who wills the world into being, and who woos us into a Christ like love from birth onwards, a love as strong as hoops of steel that not even death can destroy. In such a family we discover stories that can and do mark the contours of our own lives.

What does it mean to be this kind of family? Are we bound to one another, forced into common static beliefs or practice? Required to submit, confess, obey? Or is there, within this community that is worldwide, a grace given that sets us free, that by its very nature calls us to service in the name of that one who came to risk and care and die and live? Today we are a family, bound together as children of a parenting God, bringing to this place the burdens of our living, our loneliness, the rejections, hurts... bringing with us the scars of loving and of being loved.

Today we are a family immersed in mystery. It is a mystery that is poured out in this baptismal font, that signals that we are all cherished, prized, valued children of our heavenly mother/father and thereby called to be family. Called to be sisters and brothers to each other, not only here in this world which is God's family, where so many know not their identity or their worth. Such a welcoming family has God for refuge in an empowering spirit of strength. Such an inclusive and extended family has the promise of the one who is sovereign over all space and time, to equip us for all our yesterdays, todays and tomorrows.

For being part of such a family, we give God praise.