

A Mother's Day Service
Rev. Dr. Tracy Sprowls
May 8, 2022

Mother's Day is complicated. I know I don't have to tell you about all the many feelings each person can bring to this day- the pressures, the guilt or grief or anger, the pride and love. It is complicated, too, because I can look at each of you and I don't know which of these feelings or complex web of feelings you carry, right? There doesn't seem to be one clear message for a holiday such as this.

The reading by Lindasusan I shared earlier points to a way through the complexities of the day for we are indeed nurtured and held and beloved by others in this community and by others in our lives and if this feels not true for you then you are held and supported and nurtured by the Great Mother herself.ⁱ

Mother's Day is indeed complicated. Raising children is complicated. When my son, Izaac, was small, maybe 6, we got in the car with my friend Lynn and her two daughters, one younger than Izaac and one slightly older. We were headed south from New York for a weeklong vacation in Virginia Beach. Lynn and I hadn't seen each other in a while so we talked and talked, only interrupted by the occasional mom, can I get something to eat? Mommy, are we there yet? Mother, can I tell you a story? Lynn and I talked so much we missed the exit to the NJ turnpike and ended up in Cape May, very far from where we wanted to be! One of the kids in back said, this doesn't look right, but Lynn was quick and said we decided to take the ferry across the bay to give us a break from driving.

On the other side of the bay, we still had a few hours to drive and the questions and pleas and whines from the back seat became more frequent and louder. Mom, can I read my book to you? Mommy, can we play a game? Mother, how fast is this car? Finally, finally, I took a deep breath and turned to the children in the back seat- "the next person who says mom or mommy or mother is going to have a time out. In fact, the whole car will have a time out. Just give us a break!" And I turned around with a bit of self-satisfaction that maybe it would be quiet for a few minutes. And it was. And then from the back seat came this little voice, Momma? Elvis has left the building.

As I said, Mother's Day is complicated. Today we mark the holiday with flowers or brunch and greeting cards to honor the mothers in our lives, but it didn't start out this way.

The first Mother's Day was celebrated in sixteen cities in the United States on June 2, 1872. Julia Ward Howe, a writer, poet, and speaker who was also a Unitarian and the author of the Battle Hymn of the Republic (Glory, glory, hallelujah), organized it as a day in which women in countries all over the world would work for peace. Julia Ward Howe had witnessed the devastation of the Civil War in the United States and the Franco-Prussian War in Europe. She wanted to see countries resolve their conflicts without killing people. Howe believed that "mothers should step into these matters of

wars. It is the mothers who have the babies and who raise the children, and they do not want to waste human lives. Women have a responsibility to try to get leaders to use peaceful ways of settling conflicts.”ⁱⁱ

Julia was an activist. She believed women needed to come out of their kitchens and parlors and out into the public square. In her Mothers’ Day proclamation, Julia Ward Howe wrote, *Arise, then women of this day! Arise all women who have hearts whether your baptism be that of water or of tears. Say firmly: Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn all that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy, and patience. We women of one country will be too tender of those of another country to allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs.*

Her annual festival was called Mother’s Day and for several years, Julia presided over this festival on June 2 in Boston. She called it Mother’s Day instead of International Peace Day or some other thing “because she believed that no other group could more naturally or persuasively sponsor an annual festival of love and peace. Mother’s Day, as Julia Ward Howe envisioned it, would remind us that the whole world would be a better place if only everyone might rise to the challenge of motherhood: nurturing life, fostering peace, giving love.”ⁱⁱⁱ

In 1906, a woman named Anna Jarvis proposed that Mother’s Day be celebrated on a different date and in a different way. She suggested it be a day to honor mothers and that it should be celebrated the second week in May. She was hoping for a day that reunited families and honored the nurturing aspects of motherhood. The commercialization of the day took over however which disappointed her greatly. She detested how the day became a sentimental one celebrated with flowers and greeting cards. She engaged in several legal battles to separate Mother’s Day from the profit mongering and sentimentality. Anna Jarvis preferred the day be called Mother’s Work Day. She encouraged women to organize to better their communities by demanding better sanitation and public health and childcare, things we are still demanding today! She spent the last years of her life encouraging people not to send greeting cards or flowers on Mother’s Day.

I learned from Dan Schatz, the minister in West Chester, this additional tidbit about Mother’s Day. At least one other woman had a different idea for Mother’s Day. The suffragist Ruth Hannah McCormick lobbied Congress for a Women’s Independence Day, in early May *in recognition of the right and necessity that the women of the United States should become citizens in fact as well as in name.* “President Woodrow Wilson, who was so deeply opposed to giving women the vote that he refused even to meet with suffragists, responded by making Mother’s Day official, as a day to honor mothers – with all of the sentimentality and none of the substance its creators desired.”^{iv}

Mother’s Day is complicated and no less so given the recent “unprecedented” leak of the Supreme Court decision, expected sometime in June, that would overturn *Roe v Wade* as well as *Casey v Planned Parenthood*. I don’t want to repeat too much that you have already read in blogs or the newspapers or seen on social media but let me share a few things that I have seen or heard that particularly struck me.

An email from the UU Women's Federation sent out yesterday reminds us why this decision is unprecedented and unjust. "Roe has been a cornerstone of American law that has protected the rights of women for fifty years. A pregnant person's right to make their own reproductive choices is a basic human freedom protected by the Bill of Rights, notwithstanding the absence of specific references to abortion in the text. This was decided by the court in Roe fifty years ago.

The draft opinion penned by Justice Alito claims that Roe and its progeny, Casey, were wrongly decided by the judges that decided them. The impact of the court's action will not only cause unjust and irreparable harm to millions of women—the overwhelming majority of whom are black, brown, and low-income—but will endanger other existing American jurisprudence that protects constitutionally guaranteed civil and human rights."

I saw one of you posted on Facebook this statement from Alabama pastor Dave Barnhart who had originally posted it to his page in 2018. He said, "The unborn" are a convenient group of people to advocate for. They never make demands of you; they are morally uncomplicated, unlike the incarcerated, addicted, or the chronically poor; they don't resent your condescension or complain that you are not politically correct; unlike widows, they don't ask you to question patriarchy; unlike orphans, they don't need money, education, or childcare; unlike aliens, they don't bring all that racial, cultural, and religious baggage that you dislike; they allow you to feel good about yourself without any work at creating or maintaining relationships; and when they are born, you can forget about them, because they cease to be unborn. You can love the unborn and advocate for them without substantially challenging your own wealth, power, or privilege, without re-imagining social structures, apologizing, or making reparations to anyone. They are, in short, the perfect people to love if you want to claim you love Jesus, but actually dislike people who breathe. Prisoners? Immigrants? The sick? The poor? Widows? Orphans? All the groups that are specifically mentioned in the Bible? They all get thrown under the bus for the unborn."

This message reflects one of the deeper issues here. The debate about abortion that this country has experienced over many years isn't about abortion at all but about control and power. Not power for women or people of color or indigenous folks or our LGBTQIA nibblings or children. It is power and race. It is about power for white, cis-gendered Christian men. If these Justices and their fellow politicians and fundamentalist supporters truly were pro-life, wouldn't we already have stricter gun laws? Access to public health for all? Universal parental leave and childcare? Access to decent housing and education for all children? Sexuality education for every age in every public school?

There was a lot of anger and disbelief and analysis out there this week. Amanda Gorman, the National Youth Poet Laureate who spoke at President Biden's

inauguration, created a tiktok video rhyming out the eight reasons to stand up against abortion bans. She says, at the very end:

“The alt-right’s biggest blunder is that most Americans aren’t under their impression that a woman’s body is up to them to decide. So, when you’re outraged, these lawmakers are terrified. They want our tide to lose hope, to back up, pack up, and go home, so don’t. We won’t. We are never alone when we fight fire with feminism.

“So go, be unafraid. We will not be delayed, we will not be masquerade to the tale of a handmaid. We will not let Roe v. Wade slowly fade because when we show up today, we’re already standing up with the tomorrow we made.”

Look, Mother’s Day doesn’t have to be complicated. Let Julia Ward Howe inspire us to make the world a better place by rising to the challenge of what mothering means: nurturing life, fostering peace, giving love. Let Anna Jarvis and Ruth Ann McCormick inspire us to not let sentimentality and commercialism and paternalism destroy or alter what we value: justice, equity, and compassion in human relations.

As the Side with Love ministry proclaims, so shall we: “Our Unitarian Universalist faith affirms that all of our bodies are sacred, and that we are each endowed with the twin gifts of agency and conscience. Each of us should have the power to decide what does and doesn’t happen to our bodies at every moment of our lives because consent and bodily autonomy are holy. And when disparities in resources or freedoms make it more difficult for certain groups of people to exercise autonomy over their own bodies, our faith compels us to take liberatory action.”

So today, let us recognize the precious gift of life and the gifts that shape it: love, compassion, hope, courage, strength, imagination, righteous anger. Let us honor these gifts in us and use them wisely. Let us seek these out in others so that we can build together, rise together. Then, maybe then, we will create the world we dream about, where all are empowered to be who they are meant to be and all living in peace, held in love and beloved. Amen.

ⁱ “For all the Mothers,” by Rev. Lindasusan Ulrich

ⁱⁱ Holidays and Holy Days, page 8 (also CLF/May 1994)

ⁱⁱⁱ *This story draws heavily on material written by the Revs. Forrest Church and Lynn Ungar, written in children’s story format by Kathy E. Smith.*

^{iv} Rom a sermon, Mother’s Song, Rev. Dan Schatz