

May 10, 2020

Mother's Day

Acts 10: 34-48; 11: 18

Prayer: On this day, we thank you for mothers -- for mothers who loved us, who lost sleep over us, who prayed over us. We thank you for Mother Mary, a young girl surprised by motherhood of the Lord. We pray this morning in the name of that Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Best of Mother's Day

I always thanked God when I went to PTA meetings. Thanked God that I had a job at *The Greenville News* that kept me out of PTA leadership.

If Dante had known about PTA, he would have included it as a circle of hell.

But even having a job didn't keep me from feeling guilty at PTA. I wasn't quite up to snuff as a mom. I wasn't available to bake 300 Halloween cupcakes. I wasn't available to cut out 400 Christmas angels and apply glitter.

There is a PTA pecking order, and I was at the bottom.

Nonetheless, I attended meetings – I thought it was a law. So there we were at the first PTA meeting of my son Taylor’s first grade year.

I had all three of my children -- my 8-year-old daughter, Dustin, 6-year-old Taylor, and my 1-year-old daughter Madison. Vince was out doing whatever dads do to escape PTA. So I was doing great to get everybody there with clothes on.

Taylor was wearing his usual sweat pants and Ninja Turtles T-shirt. When we walked in, I noticed a lot of his little buddies were dressed up in suits. They looked like a convention of midget funeral directors.

We ate dinner and I was busy with Madison. So we’d been there awhile when I finally asked Taylor why all the other first-grade boys were dressed up.

He said, “Oh yeah, my teacher said we’re having a fashion show. I was supposed to dress up, too.”

What?! Well, of course, I started shrieking like a crazy person. I handed Dustin and Madison to another mom -- because who is less likely to be a

kidnapper than a woman who is already at PTA?

I threw Taylor in the car, drove home, shoved him into a dress shirt and slacks, and raced back to the school. The fashion show was over.

I was absolutely distraught. I went on and on about it so much that Taylor finally said, “Mom, it’s OK. I didn’t really want to be in the fashion show.”

As if it were about him.

Because, of course, it was about me. For the rest of the year I would be known as that Working Mom Who Couldn’t Follow Directions.

Well, Taylor grew up to be a rock ‘n’ roll musician. He moved to Hanoi, Vietnam, to play music and teach English to kindergartners and first-graders.

One Christmas, he emailed me that his school had held a holiday program. All the kids were supposed to get on stage and sing “We Wish You a Merry Christmas” for their parents. In English.

There was a first-grade boy who wouldn’t go on stage. And his mother was just shrieking at him, having a fit. Taylor said, “I don’t know much

Vietnamese but I distinctly caught the words: *English! Expensive! You! Sing!*”

So the kid slouched up on stage. And Taylor wrote, “Man, I was having flashbacks about that PTA fashion show.”

I wrote him: “Never mind your flashbacks. Find that woman and tell her I said, ‘You go, Vietnamese Mom!’ ”

Because aren’t we all *exactly* the same?

Isn’t every mother in the world concerned about her child’s success?

Doesn’t she want the best for him ... even if it comes out in strange ways?

As someone who lived during the Vietnam War, who had friends who served, who interviewed veterans, I can’t tell you how strange it was when Taylor moved to Hanoi. I even called it North Vietnam until Vince reminded me the country is no longer divided.

But Hanoi had been the enemy. Just as Japan and Germany had been the enemy for our parents’ generation, as Iran was after Vietnam. There are those who see Mexico and Central America as enemies who must be held at bay,

blocked from entry. There are those who see China as the newest enemy because the coronavirus started there.

We can scarcely get our enemies' list straight before it changes. And that is a dangerous concept in a world that is so connected and interdependent.

Today's Scripture passage speaks to that mind set.

It comes from the book of Acts, a book written by Luke to follow his gospel. It tells about what happened *after* Jesus's resurrection. It tells the rest of the story. It tells about the Holy Spirit bursting out all over the place and the spread of the early church.

One of the problems the early church faced was ... what else?

Discrimination. This new gospel or good news was just for the Jews, right?

After all, Jesus was a Jew. Peter and James and Matthew and Mark and John and Paul were all Jews.

The Jews had dietary laws to keep them clean and separate. They had marriage laws to keep them from marrying foreigners. It was the way they

survived, kept their identity, as a people. Just like their Bible, our Old Testament, told them to.

But then along comes Luke and this troubling, disruptive book of Acts. It explains that, in the days after the resurrection, Peter traveled around and preached about Jesus. To Jews.

Then one day, he and a Gentile Roman centurion named Cornelius had simultaneous dreams. Cornelius dreamed that God told him to send for Peter.

Peter dreamed that God told him to kill and eat unclean birds and reptiles and animals. He was mystified by the dream.

Then Cornelius's servants came to see Peter. The Lord told him to go to Caesarea with them.

When Peter arrived in Caesarea at Cornelius's home, he understood his dream. God was telling him there was no more clean and unclean. There was no more Jew and Gentile. The Gentiles were to be given the gospel.

Please turn to **Acts 10: 34-48**. That's where our passage begins, with Peter crying "Uncle" and speaking to the Gentiles at Cornelius's house:

34 Then Peter began to speak to them: `I truly understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.

` ³⁶You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ — he is Lord of all. ³⁷That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: ³⁸how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.

`³⁹We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; ⁴⁰but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, ⁴¹not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.

`⁴²He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³All the prophets testify about him that

everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.'

44 While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. ⁴⁵The circumcised believers (that is, the Jews) who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, ⁴⁶for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God.

Then Peter said, ⁴⁷'Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?'

⁴⁸So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

This is a radical point of departure in the New Testament. This is the point when the gospel is thrown wide open, not just to the Jews but to their enemies' list.

This is the ending of World War II, the moment the Japanese and the Germans were no longer our enemies. This is the ending of the war in Vietnam, when North Vietnam was no longer our enemy. This is that coming day when we will vacation on the beaches of Cuba, when it is no longer our enemy.

Suddenly, everything was different. This gospel of Jesus Christ was to be shared everywhere, with everyone.

But as you might imagine, there was more to the story. In chapter 11 of Acts, the Jews back in Jerusalem heard what Peter had done. And they began shrieking and throwing a fit.

Peter went back and told them all about his dream and Cornelius's dream and how the Holy Spirit descended on them, how God gave them the very same gift of repentance he had given Jewish believers.

When the Jewish believers in Jerusalem heard this, **“they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, ‘Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.’ ”** (Acts 11: 18)

Even those ol' Gentiles. Even us.

This is a story of radical inclusivity. I use it on Mother's Day because when we think of each other as children of mothers – well-meaning, occasionally shrieking German, Japanese, Vietnamese, Iranian, Honduran, Mexican and American mothers – we can begin to see each other as brothers and sisters.

Because as I read Acts, God very clearly told Peter to cut out the discrimination. No more clean and unclean. No more Jew and Gentile. No more scapegoating. No more enemies' list.

And he did: **“I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.”**

The book of Acts makes clear that God is reaching out to all of his creation. He offers this repentance freely, openly, expansively, generously. He offers it to every mother's child.

My younger daughter Madison, who survived PTA night with minimal scarring, spent two years teaching English in South Korea. When her two years were up, she spent six weeks traveling through Thailand, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.

Cambodia, she said, site of the Killing Fields of Pol Pot, was the hardest to take in. The country is very poor, still trying to clear away landmines that have been there for decades. Many Cambodians are amputees, victims of those mines.

Madison visited a jewelry making class outside a city where adult victims of landmines help support an orphanage to allow poor children to get an education. They make jewelry and let visitors come in to make copper bracelets.

Madison talked to a 14-year-old girl whose mother had sent her there from the very poorest province in all of Cambodia, at the opposite end of a country where transportation is difficult. The girl had no expectation of

seeing her mother again, at least not until she was an adult. Her mother was willing to let her daughter go so that she could get an education.

Isn't that exactly what we all want for our children?

Wouldn't we do anything to assure they have the best life possible?

Jew, Gentile, German, Japanese, Vietnamese, Cuban, Iranian, Honduran, Mexican, American. We're all alike.

So on Mother's Day, I pray for mothers all over the globe trying to keep their children safe and fed, nurtured and educated.

I pray for immigrant mothers trying to escape dangerous homes for better lives for their children.

And I pray for this woman in Cambodia who is willing to be separated from her daughter if it means her daughter can get an education, can build a better life.

You go, Cambodian mom!

Amen.

