

**The Sixth Sunday of Easter
Holy Comforter Church
The Rev. John E. Shields
May 9, 2010**

Hello and happy Mother's Day.

Mother's Day is not an official day in the church calendar, though if you were a member of the Temple Baptist Church (where I was baptized) or the North Winston Baptist Church (where you could attend and not be told you were going to hell for dancing) --- if you went to either of those churches, you'd certainly think that Mother's Day was an official church day.

In both of those places, you had better be wearing a red flower if your mother was living or a white flower if she was deceased. Fortunately for me, my parents always saw to it that I had a red flower, and they always wore white ones.

Some belief to the contrary, our Mother's Day does not get its roots from the British religious celebration called Mothering Sunday, which occurs the fourth Sunday in Lent. It is very different.

The origins for Mother's Day first began in 1858 through the efforts of a woman named Anna Reeves Jarvis. A little later Julia Ward Howe, author of the 'Battle Hymn of the Republic.' attempted to institute a national celebration of mothers that focused on her view that as a group, mothers have an inclination toward peace.

Both of these efforts eventually died out. However, Mrs. Jarvis' daughter – Anna - took up the cause in 1908 by handing out white carnations at her church in Grafton, West Virginia, to honor mothers. By the next year, that had spread to 46 states.

In 1909, she left her job and devoted her full-time efforts to lobbying for a national day for mothers.

In 1912, she met with success. Her home state of West Virginia adopted the holiday, and two years later the U.S. Congress passed a Joint Resolution, signed by President Wilson, establishing a national mother's day emphasizing the role of women in their families.

Today is Mother's Day; it is the second Sunday in May.

Yesterday was a feast day in the church calendar. It was the feast of Julian of Norwich. It is the 8th of May.

Dame Julian of Norwich was not a mother, but she said some very profound things about motherhood and the nature of God. She in fact elevated Motherhood to the highest possible status. She called God – Mother.

Sometime around the year 1393 in Norwich, England, Julian wrote a narration describing a series of visions she had witnessed during a period when she had be deathly ill. This narration is the source of her major work called *Sixteen Revelations of Divine Love*. This is believed to be the first book written by a woman in the English language.

Julian of Norwich was an anchoress in St. Julian's Church; we do not know her real name. An anchoress is a nun living a life of a recluse – a hermit - rather than living in a community, like a convent.

Julian's visions are known as 'showings'. I presume this means that she was shown in the visions something profound – in her case, something of the nature of God.

Although she lived in a time of great turmoil, Julian's theology was optimistic, speaking of God's love in terms of joy and compassion as opposed to law and duty. She believed that God loved and wanted to save everyone. In this sense, she was a Universalist. Her theology was merciful as opposed to a view of God as punishing and vengeful.

She only saw God as loving and not wrathful. She spoke of God as Mother – perhaps her most controversial theology. She addresses Jesus as 'he' but also as mother – she refers to the Trinity as Mother. She believed that the maternal aspect of Christ was literal. God is our mother as much as He is our father.

Sometime, around 1360 years earlier than Julian, a young rabbi said these words to his close friends. "Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid."

We read about the occasion for these words of comfort from the Bible in a book known as the Gospel of John. In this instance, a young rabbi named Jesus is saying this: "Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid."

This is the last half of verse 27 – chapter 14 of the Gospel according to St. John.

"Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid."

Now is one of those occasions when it would be nice to have a bible in the pews. If we had them, I'd tell you to look with me at this half verse. Because then, I would refer you to the first verse of chapter 14 – Guess what would it say?

"Do not let your hearts be troubled..."

John 14:1 is a wonderful passage with which so many people are familiar: “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places...”

We’ve heard it so many times because it is used so often at funerals – because these are words of assurance and hope.

Now today, just a little later in this same chapter of John’s gospel, we are hearing “Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.” These too are words of assurance and hope. What is going on here?

First of all, this is a part of what is known as the “Farewell Discourse” in John’s gospel. Jesus is talking with his disciples about what is going to happen to him (and to them), and he is offering assurance to them.

He is saying -- “it is going to look rough -- it is going to be rough, but Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid.”

I’ve mentioned it before, but I think it worthy to repeat that the most oft-repeated command of Jesus in all the gospels is this – do not fear!

And here we have it again – “Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid.”

Jesus is telling his followers “trust me – it is going to be alright -- it is not going to be like you would design it, but it is going to be alright – I am with you.”

That is so hard for us to believe –

Why? Because it sometimes looks as if things are out of control and heading south. When it looks that way, we want to be in control – we do not want to leave it up to God – we want to take charge ourselves.

Certainly I, like many of you, have a difficult time ‘...not letting my heart be troubled.’ There is, after all, a lot to be worried – troubled -- about.

But in fact, God has promised to be with his people – this is consistent throughout the history of God’s people and their relationship.

In the ‘Farewell Discourse’ Jesus has promised his followers that they would not be left alone – even after he has left them – he will be present to them in a new way – the Holy Spirit – the ‘Advocate’ AKA counselor, guide, companion, (and the all-time best word for it all, ‘COMFORTER!’ This powerful comforting presence would be with them to teach and remind them of all the Jesus had taught them.

Jesus promises to be with his people so that we might trust that we are indeed in God’s hands.

I mentioned that “Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid” is the last half of verse 27 – you might be interested to look back and see what the first half of verse 27 says.

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives.” And then – “Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid.”

The key for us this morning is whether we can accept that Jesus is going to be faithful to his promises – did he leave us with his spirit? – How might we know this to be so?

One person I asked about this told me “I have found that when I finally gave up and said – I turn it over to you Lord, and then I began to find some peace.”

I’ve lived long enough to know that those times will come on their own – we will all reach points in life where our resources --- whether emotional, physical --- maybe even fiscal --- are no longer sufficient.

Those are the times when we personally need to rely on Jesus’ promise that he has given us his peace – that by virtue of our baptism, we have received his spirit. – That we indeed do not walk alone.

We also need to realize that as a ‘people of God’ we are not alone – God has never abandoned his faithful – though the track record of the faithful abandoning God is not so great.

We can trust that God is with and in his church – that God is saying to this parish and to the Episcopal Church --- “Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid.”

Even in this time of stress and anxiety in our parish. Even in this time of changing leadership and uncertainty, we need not fear, not as individuals, not as the body of Christ – we are not alone – the power of the resurrected Christ has been given us. We just need to start living as if we really believe it and realize that we can help create the world of justice and peace that God intends for us.

God our Father, God our Mother, Jesus our brother and mother, God our strength and our salvation loves us and calls us each by name – no matter who and where you are – you are loved beyond imagining. You are precious and God is looking after you.

You are loved in the manner of a loving mother’s tender touch – the assurance that only she can give – “...it’s going to be alright.”

Julian said it this way – she says that God told her even in the midst of illness, deprivation, war and tumult “All shall be well, and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well.”

Do not let your hearts be troubled – All shall be well

Do not let them be afraid – All shall be well

And all manner of things shall be well.

Mother’s Day material from ‘Mother’s Day Central’

<http://www.holidays.net/mother/story.htm>

Material on Julian taken from the Episcopal Church website links to Women’s Ministries and from ‘Wikipedia’