

**Clackamas United Church of Christ**  
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**5.12.19**

**Mother's Day – a Call to Nonviolence**

Julia Ward Howe was an important American author and poet during the mid-1800s. She was also a social activist who struggled to abolish slavery and who worked for a woman's right to vote.

She met Abraham Lincoln in 1861 at the beginning of the Civil War. After meeting Lincoln, she was inspired to write her most enduring and influential piece, "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." The song instantly became a hit among Union soldiers during the war and its influence in patriotism and war continues today. The first stanza goes like this:

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord;  
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;  
He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword:  
His truth is marching on.

Glory, glory, hallelujah!  
Glory, glory, hallelujah!  
Glory, glory, hallelujah!  
His truth is marching on.

Howe hoped that these words would inspire Union soldiers to defeat the Confederacy. The words unite God and war and continues to be song with patriotic fervor today.

But what we don't know about Julia Ward Howe and her Battle Hymn of the Republic is that she had a change of heart. She watched the devastation of the Civil War with horror. She saw young men on both sides blown apart. Or, if they were lucky, they survived but were maimed for the rest of their lives.

At the beginning of the Civil War, Howe wrote that her "eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord." But as the gruesome war continued, her eyes were opened to seeing the horrors of the coming of the war.

And here's the big secret that our culture doesn't tell about Julia Ward Howe's life: After her eyes saw the horrors of war, she became a radical pacifist and fought for an end to all war. And she did so by calling for a national day dedicated to mothers. Julia Ward Howe wanted Mother's Day to be a reminder of the daily struggle to end all war.

A few years after the Civil War and its brutal carnage on both sides sank in, Howe wrote what we know today as her "Mother's Day Proclamation." This time, Howe invoked the name of God in a way that was fundamentally different from the Battle Hymn of the Republic. Instead of a battle, she now

called for peace. She called for women around the world to unite in refusing to allow their children to fight one another. She argued that women held great power and hoped that the power of mothers would inspire the world. In her proclamation for Mother's Day, instead of writing about God's "terrible swift sword" she wrote "Disarm, disarm! The sword of murder is not the balance of justice." God does not have a "terrible swift sword." We own the terrible swift sword and Howe called for us all to disarm.

She also hoped that mothers could unite so that, as she wrote, "the great human family [could] live in peace, man as the brother of man, each bearing after his own kind the sacred impress, not of Caesar, but of God."

The impress of Caesar is the impress of war. Caesar thought that the way to make peace was to destroy your enemies. But war and violence don't make for peace; they just make for more enemies.

As Jesus reveals, the impress of God is radical, nonviolent love. Julia Ward Howe began to see that truth during the Civil War. Instead of seeing the glory of the coming of the Lord in war and violence, she saw the glory of the Lord in women like Ann Jarvis. Jarvis created a group called "Mother's Day Work Clubs" in West Virginia. During the war, the Union Army requested that these work clubs act as nurses to wounded Union Army soldiers. Ann Jarvis agreed, but with a stipulation - the women of the Mother's Day Work Club would care for any soldier in need, whether from the North or the South. Ann Jarvis thought that God's love extended to all of God's children, and so should theirs

Howe and Jarvis wanted to abolish slavery. But their faith led them to see the image of God in all people. So while they struggled for justice, they knew their fight was not with flesh and blood, but with the powers and principalities. Glory, Glory, Hallelujah.

I tell you this story because Mother's Day isn't just about Hallmark Cards. It has a subversive political history of nonviolence and it is rooted in the Gospel of Jesus.

We see this in our passage this morning. Today is not only Mother's Day; for the church it is also called Good Shepherd Sunday. Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd.

What's so important about shepherds? The most important King in Israel's history was a man named David. David was the youngest of 7 brothers, so David had to do all the dirty grunt work in his family, including acting as the family shepherd. David was tending the family sheep when a prophet came to his house to anoint him as the next king of Israel.

Ever since David, the kings of Israel were referred to as Shepherds. Like a shepherd, the kings were supposed to care for their flock, especially those who were most vulnerable. But most of the Shepherds of Israel were not good. In fact, before Israel ever had a king, a prophet warned the people that they did not really want a king, because a king would take their daughters as his wives and take their sons into his army to fight his battles. But the people insisted on having a king.

Unfortunately, that prophet's warning came true. The kings of Israel were mostly bad Shepherds. David was known as the best of the Shepherds.

The people during Jesus' day were looking for a new Shepherd. They hoped for a new Son of David, a new Messiah to Shepherd them into a better world.

In our passage, Jesus was walking in the Temple, in an area called Solomon's Porch. Now at this point, we should ask, "Who was Solomon?" Solomon was the son of David who became king when David died. Solomon was known for building the first Temple of Jerusalem, but he made some big mistakes.

You may remember that when Israel was enslaved in Egypt, the Egyptians forced the people to build their temples to the Egyptian gods. Israel cried out to God for deliverance. God heard their cry and led them out of slavery. God led them into the promised land and warned them to never go back to Egypt.

When it came time for Solomon to build the Temple in Israel, he did so by imitating Egypt - the Bible tells us that he used forced labor. Solomon was a shepherd who enslaved the people. Solomon also became rich through buying and selling weapons from Egypt! Solomon was an arms dealer who amassed great amounts of wealth for himself.

The Shepherds of Israel were bad because in general they didn't care for their sheep. Instead, they sacrificed their sheep. They did this by sending men as sacrificial offerings in war, but they also sacrificed their sheep by hoarding wealth for themselves and their friends and refusing to share their wealth with the poor and the vulnerable.

And so when some of his opponents come to Jesus at Solomon's Porch and ask him if he is the Messiah, they ask him a loaded question. Jesus didn't answer it outright, but he says that his works testify to his true identity. Jesus healed people, he included those who were marginalized, he became one with the poor, he forgave people, and he loved even his enemies.

In other words, Jesus was the Good Shepherd, who refused to sacrifice his sheep, but instead gave them eternal life. This eternal life is not primarily about some place you go after you die. It's about the here and now. It's about receiving the care that the Good Shepherd has to offer us and sharing that with other.

In fact, Jesus even says that he is the Shepherd who lays down his own life for his sheep. Like Julia Ward Howe and Ann Jarvis, Jesus loved even his enemies so much that he refused to harm them. Instead he healed them by going to the cross and offering forgiveness.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd, but I have experiences in my life when I realize that I am most definitely not the Good Shepherd. I also frequently realize that I have a long way to go before I live out the Mother's Day Proclamation of Peace.

I'll give you an example. Friday was my brother's birthday and we celebrated by going out for dinner. I have no idea why this is the case, but our favorite place to celebrate sibling birthdays are nasty dive bars. You know, it has to have those video gambling machines, pool tables, and it should take the wait staff a couple of minutes to find a clean pint glass.

I picked up my brother and, I don't know, I must have been in a dive bar mood, because as I drove to our dive bar, there was a sticker for a presidential candidate in 2020 on the bumper of the car in front of us. Now, I think this presidential candidate is a really bad shepherd and there are times when I wonder why anyone would listen to his voice. So I decided to change lanes and pass the car. As we drove along, I told my brother to give the driver a not so friendly hand signal.

Yes, I'm a bad shepherd. Jesus warns in our passage that his opponents are not his sheep because they don't listen to his voice. It's easy to divide the world into us and them at this point. But that's simplistic. There are moments like that when I wonder if I'm really listening to Jesus' voice. Because so often when I try to fight the hatred that I see in the world, I end up mirroring it. I respond to what I think is hate with hatred of my own. And the older I get the more I realize how dangerous that is to my own soul. That response does not lead me to eternal life. And it shows that there are times when I do not listen to the Good Shepherd's voice.

Julia Ward Howe wrote the Battle Hymn of the Republic that glorifies violence and war. At that time, she was listening to the voice of human wrath. Later she listened to the Good Shepherd's voice and realized that violence and war don't do us any good, so she dedicated her life to peace. Ann Jarvis listened to the Good Shepherd's voice and realized that the image of God resided in all of God's children, not matter what color uniform they wore, so she cared for all of God's wounded sheep. And Jesus himself, he is our Good Shepherd, who leads us to drink from the springs of eternal life.

The danger of Good Shepherd Sunday is that we merely emphasize Jesus as the Good Shepherd. But Jesus wants us to follow him in the ways of being good shepherds to one another. You are not merely sheep. You are also shepherds. You have cared for one another. You have led one to the springs of eternal life. In various ways, you remind one another that our true identity is that we are sons and daughters of the living God who has Mothered us into being and Shepherds us into eternal life.

So on this Mother's Day, may we celebrate its original meaning as a day of peace.

May we share that peace with one another.

And may follow the Good Shepherd as he leads us to the rivers of eternal life. Glory, Glory, Hallelujah. Amen.