

**Meadowbrook Congregational Church**  
**“The Mother in God”**  
**May 8, 2011**  
**Reverend Art Ritter**

***1 John 4: 7-16***

*7 Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. <sup>8</sup>Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. <sup>9</sup>God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. <sup>10</sup>In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. <sup>11</sup>Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. <sup>12</sup>No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.*

*13 By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. <sup>14</sup>And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. <sup>15</sup>God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. <sup>16</sup>So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.*

*God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.*

***John 13:31-35***

*31 When he had gone out, Jesus said, ‘Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. <sup>32</sup>If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. <sup>33</sup>Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, “Where I am going, you cannot come.” <sup>34</sup>I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. <sup>35</sup>By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.’*

This is a difficult day to preach a sermon. It’s Mother’s Day, a secular celebration of a relationship which for many of us is sacred and holy as anything we know. This is a celebration that always happens on Sunday and sometimes in church we try to observe Mother’s Day religiously in our corporate worship and prayer. And that is not always as easy as that might sound. The modern Church has tried to make it slightly more palatable; calling this Sunday the Festival of the Christian Home. But realistically, it is really hard to think of this day as anything other than the special day in which to honor the love of our mothers.

Fortunately, in the churches I have served, this Sunday has been reserved for honoring our high school graduates. I haven’t had to preach much on Mother’s Day! The high school seniors get to speak about their mothers. It is nice to hear that honest emotion and it is equally appropriate to honor some special women within our congregation in this wonderfully simple way. Unfortunately our list of high school graduates this year is very sparse. Poor David Sparling stands alone! Those who love

to hear such speeches, like me, will have to wait until next year when we will have lots of high school seniors available to speak.

This is a difficult day to preach because the day has turned rather commercial and sentimental rather than spiritual. You might be surprised to know that Mother's Day was not created by Hallmark, FTD, or Outback Steakhouse. And it is a complicated day in which to preach because we live in a society where many women wish to be mothers but painfully cannot be. Some women have tragically lost children as babies or during their pregnancy. Many children find the pain of separation, divorce, and even abuse in their experience of their parents. A celebration of motherhood opens tender wounds.

First a history lesson. The celebration of mothers is not really a recent tradition or is it strictly an American custom. My brief research this week found that over 40 countries around the world observe Mother's Day today. The early Egyptians held an annual festival to honor a maternal deity Isis, who was viewed as the mother of all Pharaohs. The Greeks and Romans both had celebrations of the mother of all gods. In Europe, early Christians honored their "Mother" church, the church in which they were baptized on the Fourth Sunday of Lent. The recognition of human mothers came to be part of that observance in 17<sup>th</sup> century England, when on this Mothering Day, servants and trader workers were allowed to go back to their towns of origin and enjoy a family feast with mothers as the guest of honor. Mothers received flowers and presents.

The first American Mother's Day was developed in 1870 with a proclamation by Julia Ward Howe, the writer of *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*. She was so disturbed by the carnage of the Civil War, she called upon all mothers to come together and protest the futility of war, of their sons killing the sons of other mothers. She saw Mother's Day as an international day to celebrate peace. The first Sunday in June was chosen as Mother's Holiday, and initially Howe funded most of the gatherings in many American cities. After a few years however, the occasion passed away quietly, with the exception of a West Virginia's women group led by Anna Reeves Jarvis. To re-unite mothers of Union and Confederate troops, Jarvis' group embraced Howe's idea and celebrated a Mother's Day.

When Jarvis died, her daughter Anna M. Jarvis campaigned for the creation of an official Mother's Day to remember her mother and to advocate for peace. On May 10, 1908, Jarvis' Methodist church in West Virginia joined with another church in Pennsylvania to celebrate. Two white carnations were given to every mother in attendance. In that same year Senator Elmer Burkett of Nebraska proposed making Mother's Day a national holiday at the request of the YMCA. The proposal was defeated but during the next year, Mother's Day was being observed in 46 states. Anna Jarvis spent much of the next few years of her life promoting the celebration of mothers advocating peace to governments, churches, and business. Finally in 1914, President Woodrow Wilson signed a bill making Mother's Day a national observance on the second Sunday in May.

The holiday flourished, but not in the way Jarvis intended. Mother's Day became quickly known for the sale of flowers and candy and gifts for mothers. Anna Jarvis was so disturbed as to the budding commercialization that already in 1923 she sued to stop a Mother's Day event. In 1930 she was arrested for trying to stop the sale of white carnations to raise money for an American War Mothers group. She spent the rest of her life fighting against how the day which she created to celebrate peace and the end

of all war had been stolen by “charlatans, bandits, pirates, racketeers, kidnappers, and other vermin that would undermine with their greed one of the finest, noblest and truest movements and celebrations.” Shortly before her death at the age of 84, Jarvis told newspaper reporters that she was sorry she had ever started Mother’s Day.

You might be interested to know that in 2006, the National Retail Foundation reported that \$14 billion was spent on Mother’s Day. May is the busiest floral month of the year. Today is the busiest restaurant day of the year. And finally, according to Hallmark, 96% of all Americans do some sort of shopping for Mother’s Day, topping even the percentage of Christmas shoppers.

Perhaps the most fitting way to celebrate Mother’s Day within the worship of the church is to contemplate the images of God’s love in our experiences of human love. It may be obvious but for many people, this day is a celebration of the fact that the love we know in God and found taught and exemplified in Jesus is represented visibly in the love of our mothers.

I recall my first few classes in seminary. They were real eye openers. For the most part I had been trained in a very traditional theology. My experience of God was limited to a patriarchal view; that is the picture of God I held in my mind was a white man with a long, flowing white beard who resided somewhere up there in the clouds. I could not imagine an image of God beyond the traditional language used for God: Lord, Father, and King. Imagine my surprise when on the first day of class I was told that it was seminary policy not to refer to God as Father or “he.” Imagine the difficulty I had when as part of one of my first classes, I was introduced to the languages and images of feminist theology. But I eventually learned that imagining God as mother is a wonderful way to find the presence of God in the relationships and experiences that we know so well.

For example, I am grateful that in the gospel of Matthew, God’s love is described as that of a mother hen who comfort and cares for her chicks under her wings. I would like to think of God’s love for me as that- as my own mother cared and comforted and challenged me. She loved me even when I wasn’t a very lovable creature. She comforted me when the world rejected me. She challenged me to be who God created me to be, reminding me that I was indeed a very worthy and important child of God.

Perhaps it is difficult for some to see God as Mother. But there are places where the two are easily one. God as Mother is love that gives life. God as Mother is an instrument of grace, loving before love can possibly be returned, loving even in moments when there is little there to love, and loving when love is forgiveness that must flow freely easily and loving when love is difficult and brings painful correction. God as Mother sacrifices for the one who is loved. God as Mother allows the interruptions of life to be redeemed as times of blessing. God as Mother loves in support and encouragement but not always with approval. God as Mother allows for failures and rejection with the knowledge of acceptance and welcome. Rev. Patricia DeJong cites the example of the parable of the Prodigal Son as the perfect example of God’s mothering love. If Jesus’ story were about a mother and her daughters, it would still read the exact same way.

In his book *Lost in Wonder, Love, and Praise*, John Killinger offers the following affirmation, most appropriate for this day:

I believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God,

Who was born of the promise to a virgin named Mary.  
I believe in the love Mary gave her Son,  
That caused her to follow him in his ministry  
And stand by his cross as he died.  
I believe in the love of all mothers,  
And its importance in the lives of the children they bear.  
It is stronger than steel, softer than down,  
And more resilient than a green sapling on the hillside.  
It closes wounds, melts disappointments,  
And enables the weakest child to stand tall  
And straight in the fields of adversity.  
I believe that this love, even at its best,  
Is only a shadow of the love of God,  
A dark reflection of all that we can expect of him,  
Both in this life and the next.  
And I believe that one of the most beautiful sights  
In the world is a mother who lets this greater love  
Flow through her to her child,  
Blessing the world with the tenderness of her touch  
And the tears of her joy.