

Servants No More

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May 10, 2015

John 15:9-17

I.

15:15 I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.

15:16 You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name.

15:17 I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

As we gather on this Mothers Day of 2015, pastors everywhere struggle with whether to treat it as a church holiday. A day dominated by Hallmark cards, and, believe it or not, mattress sales, it can be a painful day. It is so because of stereotypes painful for those deprived of motherhood, and painful for those of us who struggle with the less than perfect reality of our own relationships. We are right to ask hard questions. And yet, if we go back past the recent times, and the mom and apple pie veneer, there is an interesting story or two behind the holiday.

It turns out that two of our *spiritual* foremothers called for a different kind of day to be set aside. In the wake of the American civil they wanted a day to grieve; and a day to move beyond war.

During the American Civil War, Ann Jarvis, a West Virginian, had insisted on organizing mothers in work camps treating both confederate and union soldiers suffering from typhoid. Following the war, she began her call for a “Mothers’ Friendship Day” to reunite families that had been divided by the war.

On June 2, 1872, to the north, in New York City, Julia Ward Howe, author of the “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” in response to both the Civil War

and the Franco-Prussian War, organized an antiwar march, entitled "Mother's Day for Peace" accompanied by a proclamation calling on mothers throughout the world to intervene in the actions of their sons and fathers. I want to read you a portion of it.

In this day of progress, in this century of light, the ambition of rulers has been allowed to barter the dear interests of domestic life for the bloody exchanges of the battle field. Thus men have done. Thus men will do. But women need no longer be made a party to proceedings which fill the globe with grief and horror. Despite the assumptions of physical force, the mother has a sacred and commanding word to say to the sons who owe their life to her suffering. That word should now be heard, and answered to as never before.

Arise, then, Christian women of this day! Arise, all women who have hearts, whether your baptism be that of water or of tears! Say firmly: We will not have great questions decided by irrelevant agencies. Our husbands shall not come to us, reeking with carnage, for caresses and applause. 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. From the bosom of the devastated earth a voice goes up with our own. It says: Disarm, disarm! The sword of murder is not the balance of justice. Blood does not wipe out dishonor, nor violence vindicate possession. As men have often forsaken the plough and the anvil at the summons of war, let women now leave all that may be left of home for a great and earnest day of council.

Let them meet first, as women, to bewail and commemorate the dead. Let them then solemnly take council with each other as to the means whereby the great human family can live in peace, man as the brother of man, each bearing after his own kind the sacred impress, not of Caesar, but of God.

In the name of womanhood and of humanity, I earnestly ask that a general congress of women, without limit of nationality, may be appointed and held at some place deemed most convenient, and at the earliest period consistent with its objects, to promote the alliance of the different nationalities, the amicable settlement of international questions, the great and general interests of peace.

—*Julia Ward Howe (authored 1870)*

II.

It is good and right that we have a national day to honor the individual mothers among us—for their acts of service and kindness in raising us up—and by mothers I mean not only biological mothers but also adoptive mothers, foster mothers, and those women who have stepped into our lives, when there was no one else to do so. And yet both Ann Jarvis and Julia Ward Howe understood the calling of the mothers of humanity to bring the particular perspective of womankind to bear on the deep suffering and division and injustice to which our world is so often given.

In the fifteenth chapter of John’s gospel, Jesus frees those who were previously named servants for something greater, a profound and dangerous calling conceived in love, conceived in freedom. “I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. [And knowing God for who she is, let us add, “Mother”].

Christ invited his followers—women and men—to step out in faith beyond the conventional religion that is all about sheep like following and blind obedience to authority, and risk a fresh kind of maturity; to find within a soul-willingness to take great risks for the sake of Love. Ann Jarvis knew this call; Julia Ward Howe knew it; we know it as well.

I want today to pay honor to one woman today, a woman who happened to be a mother, but whom I got to know in a city three hours to the west of here, in Rochester, in 1992, long after her children were grown. She died but a few weeks ago. I wasn’t able to be at her funeral, so I will share with you instead and when the morning is done, I will share these words with her family by email.

In the spring of 1992 when I was cooking dinner in Lincoln Rhode Island, one night, the phone rang. On the other end was a voice I had never heard before, a woman who identified herself as a friend of my grandmother, a Mrs. Jean Bartlett. I remembered my Grandma Naomi had spoken of her with great affection and respect, and I was a little in awe!

A member of the Lake Avenue Baptist Church, Jean was calling to see if I might be open to explore with a search committee the possibility of becoming the pastor of her congregation. I found her hard to argue with, she was so sweet...and polite.

As it turned out later in the year we moved to Rochester, and Jean became my mentor and ally. I learned that in the search process, she had been quiet about knowing my family, not wanting to prejudice the outcome. I also soon learned that when the hard thing needed saying or doing, it was Jean who would be there. When President Clinton ordered the bombing of Iraq one Christmas season, a call went out for an outdoor prayer service downtown. On a bitterly cold night as we gathered in windy downtown Rochester: there was Jean, praying and lighting a candle.

When young pre-teen girls were found playing without adult supervision on the front porch of our office, and our Christian Education Minister, Jane Grant, decided to start an afterschool girls group, Jean was there—and stayed there almost every Wednesday for the next fifteen years. When the need was there to organize more visits with the elderly, Jean was there. And when she fell and her body was broken badly, she was not content to graduate to a walker. Jean Bartlett had to get back on her feet to keep on visiting and marching.

In 2003, after her pastor was arrested in a civil disobedience action yet again protesting war, Jean Bartlett came to court for every hearing. And when I was found guilty and ordered to pay a not-so-modest fine, Jean stepped forward to pay it, knowing I might otherwise go to jail, declining to do so. Every demonstration, every ecumenical service, every opportunity for dialogue between Muslims, Christians and Jews, there was Jean Bartlett. When the refugees started coming into our church and neighborhood from Burma, there was Jean.... Welcoming the stranger, giving her clear witness for a world made just and peaceful, and not ruled by violence and war, and just plain loving of the stranger. Real love.

There were hard moments. Some days Jean wasn't able to discern clearly what her life's calling was. I tried to convince her that she was living it out every day. But I had trouble then putting in words what I perceived that calling

to be. In the clarity of time I see a woman who refused to be limited by the conventional idea of service, and insisted on taking a stand over and over and over again for the sake of Love. Sweet and polite to the n th degree, Jean was there on the picket line, in the home of a struggling friend, in the courthouse to support her friends. She was there for little girls who lived on the street near her church. She was there for refugees as for her own children. She was there when it counted.

III.

This room contains a considerable number of women who, understanding the revolutionary and liberating nature of the love you learn from the God who birthed you, have spoken out, acted up and taken chances. Some of you are in your nineties, others not yet thirty. But you all bear the “sacred impress”, to borrow from that old declaration, “not of Caesar but of God”, in whose likeness you are made. You bear as well the impress of generations of women before you who have refused to be confined, who understood they were, as Christ has declared, servants no more. From Sojourner Truth, who bore the lash, had her children torn from her ; who later declared, “Ain’t I a woman?” calling for both the abolition of slavery and women’s suffrage.... Down to this present day: you bear their impress. You are part of a great movement for change, a courageous movement that spans the globe. And you are part of the gospel of Jesus as my comrade and mentor, Jean Bartlett, understood it.

If that version of the gospel was good enough for Jean it is good enough for me. Let this day be yet another “Mother’s Day for Peace”, though few recognize it! May we find strength, courage and vision from our mothers and from the God who calls us into being and into action. And may God be with us, as we declare in solidarity with every human child, declare with sweetness but justice: “Servants no more. Friends.”