

“The Other Mothers’ Day”

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Revelation 21:1-6 = the Original Mother’s Day

Reinhold Niebuhr, the premier social ethicist of the 20th Century, as a newly minted pastor in Detroit tells of being asked “You’re doing a Mothers’ Day Sermon, right?” The first few years he got by on the excuse that the request came too late. “Why it’s almost May. Sorry.”



The next years he was able to point out that Mothers’ Day was not a celebration on the Christian calendar at all ~ established by Congress, not by any Church. All to no avail, the secular forces were simply too strong. Niebuhr’s Session sat him down and *demande*d ~ that he do Mothers’ Day.



So that year he preached a sermon on the mother of Adolf Hitler. Then the next he preached a sermon on Genghis Khan’s mother and then the mother of Mao Tse Tung. You get the drift. Next year his chastened elders conceded the point and dropped their demand for a Mothers’ Day sermon.

Niebuhr’s point is that motherhood is not the same as saintliness, and Mothers’ Day ignores that.

Anne Lamott says it this way:

“Mothering has been the richest experience of my life, but I am still opposed to Mother’s Day. It perpetuates the dangerous idea that *all* parents are somehow superior to non-parents. (Meanwhile, we know the worst, skeeviest, most evil people in the world are CEOs and politicians who are *proud* parents.)”



She continues: “I hate the way the holiday makes all non-mothers, and the daughters of dead mothers, and the mothers of dead or severely damaged children, feel the deepest kind of grief and failure. The non-mothers must sit in their churches,

temples, mosques, recovery rooms and pretend to feel good about the day while they are excluded from a holiday that benefits no one but Hallmark.”²

I've personally known a number of members who will purposely miss church if they think it is a traditional Mothers' Day. The holiday Mothers' Day has become has such an idealized picture of motherhood that it makes most of us feel inadequate rather than edified ~ criticized rather than helped to be better parents.



Surprise! The vast majority of Christians around the world do not celebrate "Mothers' Day." Fact: it is not on the Christian calendar. It is a secular celebration forced onto the church by well-meaning but still secular forces. If the Church does not celebrate the Christian meaning of the day, who will?"



The original Mother's Day was very different from the Mother's Day as we celebrate it today. That is, Mother's Day before the spirit of the age saccharinized it into a Hallmark moment. Believe or not, the original was for social justice: a

Mother's Day for Peace.

Julia Ward Howe, an ardent abolitionist, an Evangelical, idealistic reformer in Boston, is credited as the first person to suggest in 1870 that a day be set aside each year to honor the ideals of motherhood and peace.



This was the same woman who in 1862 had penned *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*. She took the tune from *John Brown's Body*, a common tune of the era, commemorating the death of another abolitionist.

The Battle Hymn was filled with apocalyptic imagery straight out of the book of Revelation. It became the rallying cry and anthem for the Union forces in that most uncivil of Civil Wars. Julia Ward Howe was but one of many courageous mothers.

- One of the same Evangelical mothers who sponsored the revivals of the early Nineteenth



century ~ and sponsored the drive for the abolition of slavery.

- One of the same Evangelical mothers who supported evangelists ~ and supported suffrage for women.
- The same mothers who in the next century brought us prohibition ~ and marched against segregation, war, weapons of mass destruction and the insanity of the nuclear arms race.
- The same abolitionist mothers who funded the Underground Railroad by inventing ingenious fundraising technique still used today under the slogan “Buy for the sake of the slave.”



In *“The Secret History of the Underground Railroad”* Eric Foner highlights this:

“Underground Railroad bake sales ... offered donated luxury goods and handmade knickknacks before the winter holidays. “Indeed,” Foner writes, “abolitionists helped to establish the practice of a Christmas ‘shopping season’ when people exchanged presents bought at commercial venues.” For thousands of women, such events also turned ordinary, “feminine” chores like baking, shopping, and sewing into thrilling acts of moral commitment and political defiance.”³



These same mothers ~ against all odds, against all hope ~ called for reconciliation after the Civil War. Mothers from North and South who had buried their sons, daughters and husbands called out together to overcome their grief and hatred

and stand together for national reconciliation.

The first Mother’s Day was a Mother’s Day for Peace after the Civil War. If they had succeeded, we might have avoided the long dark history of Reconstruction, we might never have had the Radical Republicans, the Dixiecrats, the Ku Klux Klan and over a century of Segregation and Jim Crow. We could have passed up that legacy of oppression, a legacy we still have with us in almost daily occurrences of openly racist hate, overt redlining,

police shootings of innocents, and attacks on churches, synagogues and mosques.

Mothers' Day was as radical an expression of the faith ~ against all odds, against all hope ~ as if two mothers ~ one the mother of a student killed at Kent State, the other the mother of a son killed in Vietnam ~ as radical as if these two mothers at the opposite extremes could come together in church to say "if we can reconcile, forgive and find peace, so can you, America!"



Imagine two mothers, Sarah Palin on the right and Jane Fonda from the left, coming together to reconcile our nation. How likely is that? That never could happen, never will happen, but if it did it would be unbelievable ~ as unbelievable as what Julia Ward Howe was proposing. Indeed, a miracle, a sign of real faith.



Ripped from the pages of our daily newspaper, we see how unresolved, unreconciled and unforgiven hate and pain can linger for generations.

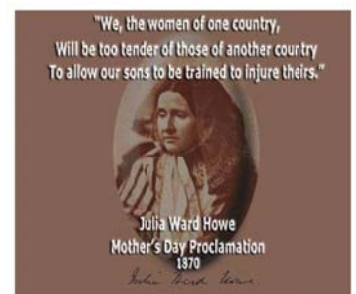
The original Mother's Day was a Mother's Day for Peace. In our current state of seemingly irreconcilable differences and intractable polarization, we could do a lot worse. This Mother's Day, every Mothers' Day could be, should be a Day to seek, to celebrate Peace, for Reconciliation sought and obtained.



Julia Ward Howe proclaimed the First Mothers' Day in 1870 ~ a day to end the carnage of all war. When the male-only Congress failed to set any day for Mothers' Day, Julia Ward Howe after 23 years of waiting in 1893, she was just prophetic enough, just courageous or just crazy enough to propose that the 4th of July be designated Mothers' Day. Her proclamation:

Arise, then, women of this day!

Say firmly: "We will not have 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." [a peace] not of Caesar, but of God.⁴

Very different from our current Mothers' Day, wouldn't you say.

Reinhold Niebuhr would be proud. Anne Lamott would endorse it. As do I. Now that's a Mothers' Day worth celebrating.



¹ http://www.salon.com/2010/05/08/hate_mothers_day_anne_lamott/

² http://www.salon.com/2010/05/08/hate_mothers_day_anne_lamott/

³ from <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/03/the-secret-history-of-the-underground-railroad/384966/>

⁴ Julia Ward Howe, *Mothers' Day Proclamation* 1870