

How Do Our Taproots Sink Into Love?

Friends, long-time and new, let's begin this time of reflection with prayer. God of all, send your nurturing Spirit among us as we wonder how our taproot might sink deeper into your empowering love. It is in the name and the way of Jesus that we pray. Amen.

Beloved people, I invite you to wonder with me this morning: how do our taproots sink into love? Scripture readings for today will encourage us along this line of wondering. Before we dive in to considering how we sink into love, let's speak about Mother's Day (and, specifically, how we spell it). Have you ever had a head-scratching moment in which you wonder if it has an apostrophe (a day belonging to A mother) or if it is simply the plural word "mothers," declaring that we honor all mothers on this day? If it has an apostrophe, why is it a singular term (the honoring of one woman's day) instead of plural – a day belonging to many mothers?

On the cover of our worship bulletin, we see how this day has been spelled in the 20th and 21st centuries. An article published in the Washington Post in recent days tells the story of Anna Jarvis, who founded Mother's Day in 1908 when she hosted a service and luncheon at a church in Pennsylvania in honor of HER mother. Anna had remembered her mother expressing a longing that there would be a day to honor the work mothers do.

I have also observed writings in recent days calling us to remember how suffragette Julia Ward Howe published a statement entitled "An Appeal to Womanhood Across the World" in the 1870s. Ward called all women to peace activism in the wake of the horrors of the Civil War.

She called for Mothers' Day festivals – that's Mothers (plural), apostrophe – during which people would advocate for domestic and international peace policies.

While Anna Jarvis did incorporate 100 of her mother's favorite flower (the carnation) into the 1908 luncheon in her mother's honor, she notably battled against the commercialization of this holiday in the decades that followed.

Today, I hope that we can honor the work of mothering in a way that expands beyond the narrow confines of traditional family structures. In our particular church, as Congregationalists and as a member body of the United Church of Christ, we claim the spiritual and intellectual freedom to celebrate people of all genders and life circumstances who do the work of mothering.

I wonder if it is that kind of courageous, faithful living Jesus had in mind when he prayed these words in today's gospel reading: *"I gave them your word, and the world has hated them for it because they don't belong to the world any more than I belong to the world... They are not of the world, any more than I am of the world. Consecrate them – make them holy through the truth – for your word is truth."* We know through Jesus' lived example that the truth, the divine word of God is every expanding, all-encompassing love (however edgy and counter the dominant cultural narrative). It is our spiritual birthright to continue to perpetuate Jesus' fearless kind of love. In addition to giving birth, mothering as a verb is defined as "giving rise to" and "caring for or protecting." As I ask the following question, I challenge you to think outside of the scope of the traditional role of a mother as someone who has opportunity to give birth to and raises a child (or at last beyond your own mother or yourself in that role). Think of another mothering person you've known.

Again, to mother is to give rise to, to care for, or to protect. With that other beloved one in your mind's eye, how would you answer this question (I invite you to share your brief thought or descriptor aloud): **How does it feel to be mothered by someone? How does it feel to be mothered (given rise to, cared for, protected) by someone?** Would any feeling words like to rise up? [*encouraged, safe, believed in, valued, accepted, cherished, encouraged*] The work we all do of mothering others is great work.

Today is the seventh and final Sunday in the season of Easter (a time of recognizing Jesus' post-resurrection living presence among his followers). Next Sunday, we will jump to celebrate Pentecost (the birth of the Christian church through the manifestation of the Holy Spirit through diverse people – then and today).

Within the worldwide Christian church though, Ascension Day occurred this past Thursday. The ascension is that mystical story in which Jesus ascended into the heavens, disappearing from his disciples' sight for a final time. Jesus' ascension invites us into a pause between his post-resurrection appearances and the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. Throughout this Easter season, we have been hearing from the gospel of John Jesus' fervent promises that his love would abide with the people long beyond his physical presence with them. Jesus wanted people to mother one another long after he showed them how to give rise to one another, care for, and protect one another.

Jesus embodied love that was more powerful in its life-affirming capacity than was all the life-crushing suffering he endured. Jesus' long-suffering, life-affirming love was so powerful that people experienced him appearing to them in interactive ways after he had died by public execution as a message intended to silence justice-seeking people.

I invite you to wonder with me today: **What spaces, persons, and actions encourage your taproot to sink in more deeply into the divine mystery of Love more powerful than death? Will you invite love to break into your experiences of fear, hate, suffering, and death? Will you pause in the space between what has been and what lies before you?**

Our first reading for today, Psalm 1, sets the tone for us (for our spiritual growth). The psalmist invites us to imagine ourselves as trees by a river, rooted into the soil of our own circumstances during our precious years as children of the Earth, with our taproots growing down deeply through that soil of our life to draw sustenance from God – our source of both life and love.

In a few moments, Claire, Michael and Sharon will share a song entitled “Like a Tree by the River.” It is one I learned as a 7-year old 2nd grade student in my Lutheran grade school. I sang it frequently for my Grandma Liza across my childhood and adolescence, at her memorial service in my 20s, and now whenever I feel a need to connect with her strong faith in the divine mystery of the Love of God. My favorite lyrics in Mary Dorn Lippert’s song are the first verse. The straightforward description of a healthy tree beckons us to a life of faith that taps into the nourishing Love that is God. Lippert wrote,

*“Like a tree by the river, spreading out in the ground
to drink from the water where its life source is found.
Bearing fruit in due season, wearing leaves that won’t fade,
Providing the traveler with rest in the shade.”*

One way of understanding our purpose in life is that we are capable of generously embodying the life-giving, life-affirming love of God.

In the story of the ascension, Jesus offers his closest friends encouragement for a life grounded in faith.

When Jesus' disciples asked him for a final time the question most pressing in their lives (would Jesus lead their people in a revolt against their oppressors and usher in a regime change and a more liberated life experience?), Jesus answered them in this way: *"It is not for you to know the times or periods that God has set by divine authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."*

If I imagine myself in the place of one of those disciples, I feel frustrated by Jesus' apparent deflection of the question. But if I listen with a more open Spirit, I hear his wisdom and can feel his love. Jesus knew that his people would continue to suffer. And he knew that the more they took a stand for love and justice, the more they would suffer. Yet he could also look them in the eye and affirm their strength of character. He could promise to them that they would receive power from the Holy Spirit – power to continue bearing witness to radical love and justice.

We heard in today's gospel reading: *"I am in the world no more, but while I am coming to you, they are still in the world. Abba, holy God, protect those whom you have given me with your Name – the Name that you gave me – that they may be one, even as we are one."* One of Jesus' deepest hopes was that his own fierce mothering of his friends and neighbors (of all walks of lives) would continue on through our living as we embody the fierce mothering Love that is God.

May we be *"like trees planted by flowing water – they bear fruit in every season, and their leaves never wither: everything they do will prosper."*

May our taproots keep sinking down through our experiences, drawing sustenance from Love.

May we be trees who receive nurturing, bear fruit and provide shade to the weary traveler in each of us – because Love is counting on us. Amen.

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Psalm 1, John 17:6-19