

Unitarian Universalist Church of Wakefield
Sunday, May 10, 2009

STORY FOR ALL AGES

“Love You Forever”

Robert Munsch

SERMON “Mothering” Rev. Maddie Sifantus

You may wonder why I chose our reading-slash-hymn on this day that honors mothers. We last sang it on my first Sunday as your minister in January, when we began together. “We forgive ourselves and each other; we begin again in love” writes my colleague Robbie Eller-Isaacs. Robbie is the current president of the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association, following my friend and colleague Ken Sawyer in that position. I would doubt that Robbie was thinking of mothers when he wrote this piece, but who of us who have been parents—mothers or fathers—has not been rigid and inaccessible at times and has had to begin again in love? If there is ever a role that asks us to begin in love again and again and again, it is being a parent, being a mother.

Or having a mother, when it comes right down to it. And all of us have had a mother, either a birth mother or an adopted mother or both...or someone who acted in the role of a mother. When I was thinking of today, sometimes I felt I could have named the sermon “Smothering” instead of “Mothering.” Too much mothering. Or that my mother or yours didn’t always live up to some ideal picture we had in our minds. Nor was I the perfect mother to my son Nigel, even though I have often said that being his mother was the best thing I’ve ever done, even with my foibles and mistakes.

How many times have each of us had to begin again in love when our greed or selfishness has blinded us to the needs of our aging mother or grandmother? Or a particular Aunt who played the role of mother for us when we were young? And, how many times do we need to forgive ourselves as mothers—as parents. As children and adult children. So I chose this reading-slash-hymn to recognize that this talking about being a mother or having a mother is not easy stuff. Despite the Hallmark holiday that both Kathleen Rolenz in her prayer and Katie Lee Crane in her Mother’s Day story mention, we all know that there is a lot more to this day for some of us than that—than picking out the Hallmark card with just the right words, making reservations at the right restaurant, buying the right box of chocolates or hanging plant—or is it roses that she wants? Or just showing up and being with our mother—or making that call across the country, as I hope my son will do to me this evening.

Where did this yet another commercial holiday come from anyway? Why do we pick a day to be set up waiting for that call from a son or daughter, a grand-child? And sometimes the call may not come. Did we really need another occasion to buy presents? Isn't this day about honoring our mother, not keeping the economy alive—although that may be a worthy cause this year. What was this day's original intent? After all, it's not on the church calendar...but it sure is present everywhere in our culture. The week after Easter and Passover, suddenly all the bunnies, baskets, and eggs are replaced by odes to motherhood down the way at The Paper Store—more than an aisle full. But celebrating motherhood is a historical tradition, dating back as far as we can look in recorded history. Ancient cultures paid tribute to mothers as goddesses, including the ancient Greeks. The Greeks celebrated Rhea (Ray-ah), the mother of the Olympians. The ancient Romans honored their mother goddess, Cybele (Sib-bell-lay), in a notoriously rowdy springtime celebration. Perhaps it is not by accident that our Mother's Day is in the spring—who knew your mother's roots went back to Cybele? The Celtic pagans marked the beginning of spring with a fertility rite celebrating their goddess Brigid together with the first milk of the ewes. And with Brigid, here I could go into a big digression.

When I was in Ireland two years ago, my little band of travelers visited St. Brigid's Well, after driving by many, many fields of sheep. The whole trip to Ireland was news to me. I signed up to go with six of my friends to accompany my oldest musical collaborators, the Rowan Brothers, as they toured Western Ireland. I knew really nothing about Celtic Spirituality to speak of then, nor did I know much about Ireland other than what I heard for many years called "the troubles" on the evening news. In the evenings, the Rowans and I would perform in Irish pubs and in the day we would be on our 20 person bus with Paddy Downes driving and Tom Pigott of County Clare as our Captain. Life was busy before the trip, and so I had barely even looked at the itinerary. So everything was a great surprise! Who knew about the Burren (I thought it was an Irish Pub in Somerville) or the Cliffs of Mohr? I did know about the Aran Islands because I had sung on the soundtrack of the movie *The Secret of Roan Inish*. And I had sung *Galway Bay* multiple times over twenty years with my elder chorus, the Golden Tones. And I had been a long time lover of Irish music, probably touched off years ago by Enya.

But I had never heard of Sheela, goddess of the Celts until I was standing in a graveyard looking at one above a doorway of an ancient church. This Sheela was a stone carved image of a naked female figure with her hands emphasizing her genitals. There, there was no easy way to

say that! Believe me, it was surprising to see this graphic female image above the door of this church. On another wall was a double Coptic cross. But here above the door was this amazing, compelling symbol of fertility. What a mama! What a feminine image of God!

So one day I tumbled out of the door of our bus and found this Sheela...and next day the bus door opened and we were at St. Brigid's Well. I can't say I have ever been anywhere like this place dedicated to St. Brigid—or is it really dedicated to the earlier pagan Goddess Brigid? Both the saint and the goddess share the name and the feast day. Those who study these things think this may indicate that St. Brigid is either partially or entirely a fictional creation based on the pagan goddess in order to convert the Celts to Christianity. As we know, the early Christians were prone to appropriating pagan holidays to further their own cause. Brigid the goddess was an oracle and was celebrated as the predictor of the growing season's success. Brigid was also celebrated as a time when the growing sun must be encouraged throughout the coldest of winter months. Brigid or Imbolc is the pagan holiday for this celebration among pagans and is marked with the making and burning of candles to symbolize this important process. In Christian traditions, the day called Candlemas, and was added to the calendar to coincide with Brigid. Candlemas is the day of purification of the Virgin Mary, marked with a candlelight ceremony. Other reports have Brigid as a fire goddess...and who knows what else.

I didn't know any of this as I tumbled out of our bus on the road between the Cliffs of Mohr and Liscannor at this not very Christian holy well nestled right next to a pub with the Guinness sign out front. Another traveler describes this innocuous from the outside looking Catholic grotto this way:

From the outside, it just looks like every other shrine in Ireland - tacky, and slightly decrepit. Inside the gate, beside the statue of a woman in black and white, wielding a staff (a black and white Virgin Mary, if you like) there's a dark tunnel, leading into a holy well dedicated to Saint Brigid. There's dozens of such holy wells around Ireland, but this one is different.

People come from all over to visit this well, and to leave a bizarre collection of offerings inside the small, man-made cave. Apart from the candles, there's scarves and handkerchiefs, holy statues in various states of disarray and draped in rosary beads, Stacked up against the walls are soft toys, prosthetics, dog collars, and photographs of loved ones. Visitors to St. Brigid's Well come there to seek solace, to ask for help in finding missing persons and lost pets. To wish the dead well, to pray for sick children.¹

¹ http://www.blather.net/blather/2004/08/st_brigids_brds_well_liscannor.html

I can't describe how moving it was to walk into this odd place. When I was there, the little girl Madeleine had just disappeared from her family while on vacation in Spain. Someone had put pictures of her in the grotto. There were pictures of fireman lost in 9/11—all sorts of things beyond description, some with moss growing over them. Our band of travelers were profoundly moved by the felt pleas to the goddess, the saint and what seemed like the archetype of nurturing and healing mother. We actually returned on another day of our trip so members of our group could bring candles to light, adding to the many lit candles we found on our arrival. I suspect that every day is Mother's Day in that grotto. Sons and daughters bring offerings of what is most precious to them or what are their greatest longings. And perhaps today someone is even bringing a box of chocolates. Who knows.

Let's leave Ireland but not go too far. During the 17th century, those living on the British Isles and Western Europe initiated a religious celebration of motherhood, certainly building on the more ancient, pagan traditions. They called this day Mothering Sunday, and it was the fourth Sunday of the Lenten season. This holiday featured the reunification of mothers and their children, separated when working class families had to split up and send their children to be employed as house servants. On Mothering Sunday, the child servants were allowed to return home for the day to visit with their parents. They would return to their "mother church" for a service on what came to be named Laeture Sunday, to honor the Virgin Mary and the "mother church". Anyone who did this was said to have gone "a-mothering". Another tradition associated with Mothering Sunday was the practice of what was called "clipping the church". This was when the congregation would form a ring around their church building and, holding hands, embrace it. As I contemplated this image, I was wondering how we might hold hands and form a ring our building, embracing this place that might feel like a mother to us, something to lean on and be embraced by.

In our country, our Mother's Day has a more modern origin. Some say that we should not confuse our Mother's Day with Mothering Day...however, I would say that our impulse to honor mothers and motherhood is as old as these ancient goddesses. Our day originates with a woman named Anna Reeves Jarvis who in 1858 held a Mother's Work Day to raise awareness about local sanitation issues. During the civil war she expanded the scope of this day to include sanitary conditions on both sides of the battlefield. Meanwhile, Julia Ward Howe, who we know as the author of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic", tried to institute a national celebration of

mothers. She was so horrified by the ravages of the Civil War that she worked to have a day set aside when mothers could grieve the loss of their sons and work for a more peaceful world. The first one was held in 1872 and they continued for a decade or so.

In 1905, Anna Reeves Jarvis died and her daughter, Anna Jarvis, took up her mother's project, swearing to realize her mother's lifelong dream of creating a national day to honor mothers. She began by convincing her church in West Virginia to have a Sunday dedicated to mothers. Other churches cottoned on to the idea. Jarvis' home state adopted an official Mother's Day in 1912, with President Wilson establishing a national Mother's Day two years later. By this point, Mother's Day emphasized the role of women in their families. Over the decades, Mother's Day has taken on a life of its own, becoming the Hallmark commercial holiday we experience. Jarvis would be mortified to see what it has become of it if she walked the aisles of our local CVS. After all, she said, "I wanted it to be a day of sentiment, not profit." In fact, in her own lifetime, she herself became a major opponent of what the holiday had become. She actually spent her inheritance fighting what she saw as the abuse of the celebration.

Despite what we know as the commercialization of Mother's Day—and all our holidays, I believe that we do need to celebrate. We do need our holidays and holy days. And I think that Julia Ward Howe and Anna Jarvis had the right idea. As we know, we don't need to spend a lot of money buying diamond earrings or going to the most expensive restaurants in Boston. They tell us that Mother's Day is the most popular day of the year to dine out in a restaurant in the United States. Presents, chocolates and breakfast in bed are all well and good—but we know that it really is all about showing our love and appreciation for those who mothered us and who mother others. It can be about just spending time and perhaps giving a donation to Renewal House of the UU Urban Ministry in our mother or mothering person's honor. Taking time to honor those who have taken their time to nurture us. Nurtured us even when they have needed nurturing themselves.

Mothers are called to nurture even when they are tired, weary to the bone. And mothers are called to nurture, even when they are going through life threatening illness. This evening downstairs in the social hall, if I can figure out how to use the TV and DVD player, I will be showing a moving documentary about one such mother, Ann Murray Paige. This mother of two young children was diagnosed with breast cancer when she was 38 years old. Because she had been a local television new anchor, she chose to chronicle her experience in a documentary that

she named “The Breast Cancer Diaries.” Only about 5% of breast cancer diagnoses are in people under the age of 40. On this Mother’s Day, we all remember the seemingly epidemic occurrence of breast cancer and other cancers around us. In Ann’s case, she tells us in the documentary that she put her career on hold to be a mother—and then she had to put motherhood on hold to be a full time cancer patient. She asks herself, “How do I have the strength to be a mother when all I want right now is my own mother?” This documentary is about hope, even in the darkest hour. You will laugh and cry with me.

We hold those mothers who are dealing with significant health issues close to us this Mother’s Day. We remember those mothers with Alzheimer’s and other forms of dementia who perhaps can no longer even remember being a mother—perhaps your mother. We still come together to shine hope, as will the Avon Walk for Breast Cancer that is taking place in Boston next weekend. Their motto this year is “Ready. Set. Hope.” We will in a few moments take a special second offering to donate towards that cause which funds locally organizations like Dana Farber Cancer Institute, Boston Medical Center and Massachusetts General Cancer Center. And we remember those families like Ann’s who struggle with a cancer diagnosis. May we offer our compassion and our help with the day to day doings of life.

So on this Mother’s Day, may we think about mothers. May we give honor to those persons who loved us and nurtured us. For fathers who are mothers and mother who are fathers. And perhaps we will sing:

I’ll love you forever
I’ll love you for always,
As long as I’m living
My Mommy you’ll be.