

Sermon: We will not be left as orphans

Part of the secret of survival as a pastor is knowing what local customs and celebrations are held sacred and sacred by the community which has called you to be its pastor and pays your salary. Christmas and Easter are easy. Smart ministers with an instinct for survival know not to mess too much with Christmas and Easter. Beyond that, however, communities differ.

The community Ecumenical Christmas and Easter services are big events in Stirling, Shrove Tuesday, Ham Dinner, Yard and Bake sales, Pie auctions, community dinners and we can go on and on, about the events that this community and congregation are involved in on an annual basis.

As important as these events are, they do not appear on the liturgical calendar of the church year. They are not “official” church celebrations or festivals, and sometimes the traditionalists among us hold out against them and find them to be an intrusion into our sacred turf.

And the most volatile of these non-liturgical but culturally critical events is Mother’s Day. Some ministers ignore it. Some truly brave, or foolishly critique it. Not I.

I loved my mother, as I expect many here do or did as well. And even though my mom was mildly critical of the very idea of a special day to honor mothers, it was not a good idea to ignore the occasion. Her point, of course, was that there are wonderful women who are not mothers, who want to be mothers but can’t be, or who chose not to be; and sometimes the day becomes deeply painful.

On the other hand, one of the things that happens on this day is that many families worship together. Every year sometime during the week before, someone inevitably will say to me “I’m bringing Mother to church on Sunday. I hope it is a good service.” I hope so too.

The advocate we read of in today's Gospel, would stand with us before God and try to persuade God to forgive, love, and accept us. This advocate would intercede on our behalf, plead our case, and seek a favorable judgment. Sound a bit like what a mother might do?

But what if the Advocate's role is not to change God's mind but to change our minds about ourselves and each other? Once again, isn't that something a mother might do?

The statement that we need an Advocate to change God's mind about us just doesn't fit a God "who so loved the world." It's contrary to Jesus saying that he came not to condemn the world but to save, heal, and transform it, "I came," he says, "that they may have life, and have it abundantly"

And it sure doesn't seem to reflect the Jesus portrayed by the gospel writers: a Jesus who chose the poor, the broken, the sinful; a Jesus who healed and transformed lives; a Jesus who excluded no one; a Jesus who assures us there is a room for us in his Father's house; a Jesus who is characterized by love, forgiveness, and welcome. And if that's who Jesus is then that's who the Father is too. "Whoever has seen me," Jesus says, "has seen the Father".

So, what if the Advocate's role is the opposite of what we often think it is? What if the Advocate doesn't represent us before God, but represents God before us? After all, Jesus said, "The Advocate ... will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I said to you".

"Do not let your hearts be troubled." "I am the bread of life." "I am the good shepherd." "I am the light of the world." "Do not be afraid." "My peace I give you, my peace I leave with you." "I am with you always, to the end of the age." "Love your neighbor as your self." "Love your enemy." "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged." "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." "

We all need an Advocate, and we all need to be reminded of that, especially when the future is uncertain or our life has been turned upside down and we're afraid or overwhelmed. We need to be reminded when we're angry or frustrated. We need to be reminded when we are sad and grieving. We need to be reminded when we're lost and don't know the way. We need to be reminded when we feel like an orphan – alone and lonely, on our own, having to look out and fend for ourselves.

None of us get through life alone. We need God's advocacy and reminding. If you want to know where reminding and advocacy are needed, look for places of pain, diminished life, or disconnection. Look for those places in your own life and in the lives of others.

"I will not leave you as orphans," Jesus says. "I will ask the Father and he will give you another Advocate."

This Advocate does not, however, just remind us of what Jesus said. It is a life lived in and with the spirit of God. This Advocate insists we give existence to Jesus' words and life in our lives through our thoughts, words, and actions.

The Advocate is felt as "the rumblings and restlessness of our heart" insisting, calling, luring, and soliciting our response "in the concrete conditions of life". The Advocate shows up every time you and I embody God's life and spirit.

We are the ones being sent. We are the ones who make God's life present and tangible. We are the ones who give flesh to Jesus' words. You and I are the Advocate filled with the spirit of God.

Have you ever thought of yourself as God's Advocate? Have you ever thought of yourself as the one who gives existence to God's insistence for your own life or the life of another? And what if each one of us started living like that? What might this advocacy look like in your life?

Advocacy always looks like love and affirms life. When your heart breaks for the pain of the world, when you reach out in compassion, when you weep over another's loss you are the Advocate in that moment. When you offer or seek forgiveness, when you refuse to judge, when mercy rather than condemnation is your way, you are God's Advocate.

Advocates sit at the bedside of another. They care for the sick and dying. They console the bereaved.

Wherever there is life and more life, there is the Advocate. Life and love are the advocacy of God.

Look around. Look at the concrete conditions of your life, relationships, and world. Look for the places of pain, diminished life, or disconnection. What advocacy is being asked of you? And how often does it remind you of the love of your mother?

God has given us mothers to carry, raise, teach, and mold us into godly people. Of course, no mother is perfect, and not everyone grows up with a loving mother. But every mother out there — from the one who feels she was born to be a mom to the one who struggles with the title — deserves honor and praise for the role God has given them. A role that reflects God's love in a deeply profound way.

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for the gift of motherhood. Today, we celebrate the loving sacrifice of mothers, both biological and spiritual, who nurture and guide us in your ways. Bless them with joy, strength, and love to continue their selfless devotion. May they feel deeply appreciated and honored not just today, but every day. Amen.