

Mother's Day

Initially, I would like to acknowledge a sermon, which I have drawn on in part, by Steve Edington of UU Church of Nashua, US.

He maintains that in his experience 'the sermon topic most avoided' is the one about mothers on Mothers' Day!

Why? Praise mothers too much and too uncritically and you invite criticism from anyone who has some unpleasant issues they do not want to be reminded of; if you refer to any of these types of issues you then have criticism from those who do not have any of these issues and don't need to hear of them.

Then you may have women who aren't mothers, by choice or circumstance and are not needing to hear about the virtues of motherhood or even those who aren't greatly thrilled about motherhood – then there is the traditional family structure mothers, the single mothers, the same sex mothers etc etc who need to be acknowledged.

He feels that the topic becomes a minefield and has decided the way to go is to talk about the history of Mothers' Day.

This is the path I had decided to follow when preparing for this talk on Mothers' Day and before reading this particular sermon.

Spiritual Origins of Mothers Day

The traditional practice of honouring motherhood is rooted in antiquity when societies tended to celebrate Goddesses and symbols of motherhood rather than actual mothers.

The personal family orientation of Mothers Day is a relatively new phenomenon; only in the past few centuries did these celebrations develop a human focus and only in the last century did it take on commercial overtones.

One of the earliest historical records of a society celebrating a Mother deity can be found among the ancient Egyptians who held an annual festival to honor the goddess Isis; her head is typically crowned by a pair of bull horns enclosing a fiery sun orb and she is most often depicted sitting on a throne.

She gave birth to Horus, whom she hid among the reeds lest he be slaughtered by Seth, her jealous brother. Horus grew up and defeated Seth and became the first ruler of a unified Egypt – Isis then was known as the mother of the pharaohs.

Isis also held a place at the Roman temple, despite being a foreign deity; the Festival of Isis was used by the Romans to commemorate an important battle and mark the beginning of winter which centred around mostly female dancers, musicians and singers.

The Mother and Son imagery of Isis and Horus – in which Isis cradles and suckles her son – is strikingly similar to that of the Virgin Mary and baby Jesus.

The emergence of two other mother goddesses, Cybele from Phrygia in ancient Anatolia (modern Turkey) and Rhea from Greece may be the precursors for the worship and celebration of motherhood in Europe.

Cybele has roots dating back 6 000 years to Neolithic times when Phrygians celebrated a 'Mother Goddess' whose realm was the earth's natural surroundings (mountains, caverns) and wild animals and she was also known as 'Mother of the Animals'.

By around 600BC she had been adopted as a Mother Goddess into much of Asia Minor and parts of Greece.

At about the same time Greeks also worshipped another mother goddess, Rhea, the Greek mother of the Gods; she was born from the union of Gaia, the personification of Earth and Uranus, the sky god.

After a meteor shower and failed harvest, which seemed to predict doom for the Roman Republic, Rome officially adopted Cybele as its own Mother Goddess; the Romans simply referred to her as Magna Mater, the Great Mother.

The Roman festival of Megalesia, to celebrate the goddess, was held from April 4-10 – related to the Vernal Equinox (March 20/21) and to the Roman festivals of Hilaria (March 15-28), in celebration of Cybele.

The earlier festivals became so notorious and wild, they were eventually banned whereas the more conservative celebrations of Hilaria involved eating honey cakes and sharing flowers.

European Celebration

By the 16th Century, as ancient Roman traditions in Europe and England gave way to the spread of Christianity, Hilaria celebrations became part of Laetare Sunday - the fourth Sunday of Lent in the Christian liturgical calendar.

Early English Christians, initially used the day to honor the Virgin Mary, Mother of Christ, in the church in which they had been baptised – their Mother Church, which would be decorated with jewels, flowers and other offerings.

In the 17th century, an English clerical decree broadened the celebration to include real Mothers; this was a Lenten Sunday and it provided a reprieve from the fasting and penance of Lent.

Mothering Sunday became a day when domestic servants (in service) were given a day off to visit their mother church with their mothers and other family members – this was one of the few days that they were able to gather together; the younger ones would pick wild flowers along the way to give to their mothers.

The religious tradition evolved into the Mothering Sunday secular tradition of giving gifts to mothers.

By the 1920's the custom had lapsed in Ireland and continental Europe.

American Celebration History

The first English settlers to the US discontinued the tradition of Mothering Sunday as it is believed that it conflicted with their Puritan ideals – they practised a more conservative Christianity and ignored more secular holidays and focussed on a no frills devotion to God.

Even Christmas and Easter were more sombre occasions taking place in churches stripped of extraneous ornamentation.

Julia Ward Howe and her husband belonged to the Boston Unitarian Transcendentalist congregation in pre Civil War years; Ralph Waldo Emerson was also a member. When the Civil War broke out both Julia and her husband worked for the organisation that was a forerunner of the Red Cross.

After seeing the human toll of war she gained another perspective on war – far less exalted than that expressed in the words of 'The Battle Hymn of the Republic' that she had written earlier!

She became a committed peace activist and advocate of women's suffrage which led her, in the later years of her life, to rally women – mothers and otherwise – to the peace cause.

She issued a proclamation, on June 2 1870, calling for a Mother's Day for Peace which she envisioned as an international peace festival; this date was celebrated in some American cities.

Before the Civil War, in the Appalachians – West Virginia, a poor part of the country, Anna Jarvis – a Methodist ministers wife- had organized Mother's Day Work Clubs which raised money to help feed and provide medical aid to mothers and children.

After the Civil War, during which that part of the country changed sides and formed the 35th state – the State of West Virginia – soldiers returned home, some of whom had been fighting on opposite sides, causing conflict and tension in their communities.

So, in 1865, Anna Jarvis organized a Mother's Friendship Day to bring together both sides; some feared this might generate fights and violence but it was a success and it became an annual event for several years in West Virginia.

So, Mother's Day was used by both women to promote peace and reconciliation in the wake of the Civil War.

Her daughter, also Anna Jarvis, began a crusade after her mother died in 1905, to have a national Mother's Day recognized; as the white carnation was her mother's favourite flower, it became the symbol of her cause.

After much lobbying, Pres Woodrow Wilson signed a Congressional Proclamation designating Mother's Day as an official holiday on the second Sunday in May – the first of which occurred in 1907.

However, in the years before her death in 1948, Anna Jarvis became frustrated and disillusioned with what happened to 'her holiday' – the commercialisation with the buying and giving of flowers, chocolates and greeting cards. She incorporated herself as the Mother's Day International Association to try to retain some control; trademarked phrases such as 'Mother's Day' (to be in singular form for each individual mother); organized boycotts, threatened lawsuits and attacked Eleanor Roosevelt for using the day to raise funds for charities.

She would never acknowledge Julia Ward Howe's attempts to establish a 'Mother's Day for Peace' and always said the creation was hers alone.

Anna died penniless, at 84, in a sanitarium as her attempts to reform Mother's Day had cost her everything.

Today, Mother's Day is the most popular day for dining out in the US as well as giving flowers and cards.

Mother's Day is celebrated mostly on the second Sunday in May in many countries though in the Arab world it is on March 21st; in Spain and Panama it is on 8 December (Feast of the Immaculate Conception).

In France, following the lead of American soldiers in WW1, M's Day was initially celebrated in 1918; it was officially declared to be on December 19 in 1920 when the tradition of celebrating mothers was focussed on the repopulation of France after the Great War – medals were awarded according to the number of children produced – eight or more, and the mother received a gold medal!

Today mothers receive cakes resembling bouquets of flowers, cards and perfume.

After WW11, inspired by American servicemen, Britain began again to celebrate Mother's Day .

One traditional cake, Simnel Cake, was served; a glazed fruitcake arising from the story of a couple who couldn't decide whether to boil or bake a cake, so they did both!

Flowers, of course, play a large part in this day:

Carnations - white, were prominent in early US; now, red are for living mothers and white for deceased. According to Gr. legend (dianthus) they were the symbol of a mother's eternal love.

Roses – symbolically linked to motherhood; Isis – ideal mother; Aphrodite – goddess of love and beauty and in the Middle Ages, queen of flowers and symbol of the Virgin Mary.

Chrysanthemums are traditional in Australia where they are naturally in season and also end in the letters 'mum'.

(To Japan in 8th century – Chrysanthemum Throne)

Australian tradition followed the UK and US patterns in the 1920's and became commercialised in the same way!

Input you may have regarding stories about Mother's Day. I'll begin - my first born etc

We extinguish the chalice here that it might glow gently in our hearts.

May it light your path as you leave here.

May it guide your way until we are together again.