

“Truth Be Told”

In the name of our risen Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, grace to you and peace.

From Lutheran pulpits in churches around the country, this morning, not to mention the pulpits of other Christian denominations, pastors, priests, ministers, and clergy, are either completely ignoring this day or piously lecturing how the Church does not celebrate secular holidays like Mother's Day or Father's Day. Yet we have hymns and prayers for national holidays in our hymn book. And we remember the lives of saints, some of whom, were very secular indeed. Such summary dismissals, therefore, cannot be the whole truth.

Truth be told, for some of us, Mother's Day, like Father's Day, is filled with more than a measure of discomfort, for all sorts of reasons. For some of us it is the pain of having lost our mothers to death and, of course, that pain is intensified if that loss is recent. For others, it's the pain of having our mothers still alive but with a relationship, if not painful, that is less than satisfactory. Some of us are probably sitting here, filled with dread about this afternoon's visit or tonight's dinner. For many of us, and here I'm talking about those of you who are mothers, it's about being a mother with a less than satisfactory relationship with our own children. And please know I say that as a father who have had my moments with my sons as they have had with me.

Many of us live with the regret of never having had children, or having lost a child in death, the worst of all possible losses as any parent knows who has experienced that. Some know the lingering pain of a child given up for adoption long ago or sacrificed to abortion. And, yes, others of us may have never been biological mothers (or fathers in my case) but have deep, satisfying relationships with children who might just as well be our own. Others may know women - or men - who are more like mothers than our own biological mothers could ever be.

What's my point in saying all this? None of us is exempt from the messy complications of family relationships. It becomes clear, suddenly, why it is much easier to put the matters of Church before matters of family. There is a comforting kind of salve that comes from imposing the rules of the Church on the breaks and pains of one's heart! Into all the complications of modern life, the ancient words of Jesus came rushing like a cool wind on a hot day. You heard these two weeks ago in the gospel reading for the Fifth Sunday of Easter. “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Mind you, Jesus says all these things after Judas betrays him with a kiss. He tells them these things, then bids them farewell before he is brought to trial, condemned and crucified. What a remarkable man! No wonder he was the Son of God. No human could ever live up to those standards. Could they?

Let me tell you about a man who I came to recognize early on was a father and mother in God to many people. His name was Father Peter, Ukranian Orthodox priest, I never could pronounce his last name. At the time, thirty years ago, he was the priest of the little Ukranian church on the corner of King St and Ezra St, in Waterloo, about three blocks from our seminary, it's still there, he is not. One of my seminary classes, the one on liturgy, required me to observe a church, a liturgical church, other than Lutheran, Anglican, Roman Catholic, Orthodox. I chose that Ukranian church because it was close and I always associated Ukranian Orthodox with beautiful music and perogies which I love.

Anyways, Father Peter, allowed me to observe and invited me to come whenever I could. Sometimes he even let me be up at the front with him, even though I was silent for I spoke no Ukranian. I remember asking him if this would upset his people, and he said, “It would be good for my people, to see that Christians aren't just Ukranian!” I was fascinated with worship, didn't much like the incense but the chanting, the strange incantations, the ritual, I loved it!

One day, he called and asked me if I wanted to observe a funeral and, of course, I did. The funeral service was filled with the same mystery and grandeur that marked every Ukrainian liturgy – Sunday Eucharist, wedding or baptisms. The only thing changed was the make up of the congregation. This one was filled with men in sombre black coats, woman dressed head to toe in black – complete with black scarves tied severely under their ample chins. And, yes, others who clearly weren't a member of that church or even Ukrainian.

It came time for what I would call the eulogy. I assumed Father Peter would speak to the congregation in Ukrainian, so I was taken aback when he spoke in English. Perhaps he did it for the non-Ukrainian speakers in the crowd. I've never forgotten this. "There are people in this world," he said, "who are always making you happy. They are always having a smile, or a kind word to say. They are always doing a nice thing. Just to see them on the street makes your heart burst into song, so happy do they make you to see them." Then Father Peter walked over to the casket and put his hand lovingly on the top and said, "This ... is not one of those people."

I was stunned. I thought, "What the heck is he doing?" Then I looked around. All these people dressed in black were nodding their heads in agreement.

Then Father Peter said this and I want you to hear these words. "But isn't our God so good, isn't our God so forgiving, that now, even now, this man is resting in eternal light, in the loving arms of God, beloved of our Saviour, Jesus Christ, and blessed by the warmth of the Holy Spirit." "Because," he added, "People is people, and God is God."

In that one moment, Father Peter taught me more about the love of God in Christ than any one of my courses in seminary. "People is people, and God is God." So, stop putting such high and divine expectations on each other and love one another as God loves us.

Friends, it's so easy to miss the point that if there's a Christ in me and a Christ in you, then there's a stumbling, saying-all-the-wrong-things disciple Peter in me and a Peter in you. And there's a doubting Thomas in me and a doubting Thomas in you. And there's a scrupulous tax-collecting - putting details - before - people Matthew in me, and a Matthew in you. And there's a betraying Judas in both of us.

People is people, and God is God. We all make messes in our lives, of our lives, and in other people's lives. We don't mean to, but there it is. We hurt the very people we love and betray our best intentions to do otherwise. The more we detest our own imperfections, the more we seem to demand perfection from others. What we fear most in ourselves, we hate most in others. Into these dilemmas, Father Peter says, "People is people, and God is God."

So, if you are worried about your Mother's Day celebration - for whatever reason - or about the fact that the Church's denial of reality won't make it any better. Relax. God doesn't expect the same perfection you – or this culture – expect of you or others – or even your mothers and fathers. Because God was in Christ, God knows our humanness, even better than we do. And God still loves us very, very much.

My brothers and sisters in Christ. Just remember this. Into these modern times comes the ancient words of Jesus, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. AMEN.