

Mother's Day: It's complicated

By The Rev. Angela T. !Khabeb *Originally published May 2019*

Every year on the second Sunday of May, people across the U.S. honor the sacrificial love of mothers. It's a time for family and festivities. Many celebrate by buying flowers, greeting cards and brunch. Although a secular holiday, Mother's Day is observed in certain ELCA congregations. Some churches give carnations or ask mothers to stand for a round of applause. But these well-meaning moments of recognition can be painful; for many, Mother's Day is complicated. (Even Anna Reeves Jarvis, the "mother" of Mother's Day, grew to resent the commercialization of the holiday and fought against it until the day she died.)

My love/hate relationship with Mother's Day began years ago after my husband and I had a stillbirth. Our first daughter, Baby Joy, entered the world in silence, and our lives were shattered. Consequently, Mother's Day for me is equal parts joy and sorrow. Even though we have three living children whom we adore, my husband and I walk through life with a lingering incompleteness. When we look at our three wonderful children, we recognize that somebody is missing. This incompleteness is especially palpable during holidays, and for me, Mother's Day is the worst.

In years past, I've given myself permission to simply opt out—stay at home, pull my kids in close to my heart, and just ... be. Perhaps you are without your mother. Or you're like me and your son or daughter is gone. Or maybe you've always wanted children but, for whatever reason, that is not your reality. For some of us, simply attending church on Mother's Day is an act of courage. **Whether Mother's Day for you is awesome or awkward, joyful or tearful, a time for celebration or a time for hibernation, it does speak to the sacrificial love of motherhood, which can point us to the boundless love of our mothering God.**

Our individual experiences may vary, but we all had someone give birth to us. Some of us, like me, have mothers who are incredibly awesome. Yet for some, the word "mother" is not synonymous with love. Sadly, too many of us know mothers who are far from the loving archetype. Even our God, through the prophet Isaiah, recognized this painful reality. "Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you" (Isaiah 49:15).

For some of us, it might be challenging to imagine God as Mother. When I think of our mothering God, I immediately think of our Savior in Matthew's gospel. Jesus himself steps into the role of mother: "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings" (Matthew 23:37). There are many other maternal similes in the Bible. In Hosea 13:8, God is imagined as an angry mother bear defending her cubs. In Deuteronomy 32:11-12, we witness God as a majestic mother eagle. This imagery reminds us that God's grace stretches far beyond our human understanding. Not even a mother's love can compare with God's love for us, which is powerful, everlasting and unfathomable. God's love never changes and never fails. This is something we all can celebrate!

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