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Acts 2:14a, 21-25 & 36-41

GET OUT WHILE YOU CAN

My memories of Mother's Day are probably not much different from yours. Church and brunch, cards and small gifts, the gathering of the family together and carnations - a red one if your mother was alive, a white one if she had passed. We celebrated our mothers over the family meal - mom's favorites nestled in between what we kids would eat, but this was the extent of Mother's Day at church. Pass out the carnations and say a few nice words about our mothers - how we couldn't live without them and how they taught us to be nice to other people and always made our favorite meals and how they have cemented in our memories to always wear clean underwear in case of that accident. That was about it - that and a carnation.

But the woman who wrote the words to the Battle Hymn of the Republic, Julia Ward Howe, had other things in mind for Mother's Day. Mother's Day for her grew out of her membership in the Radicals Club, a collection of New Englanders who gathered to fuss and foment ideas about the conditions of the world. She gathered with Emerson and Channing and a host of men and women who formed abolitionist movements, spiritualist movements and a mighty peace and justice women's movement that gave birth to this idea of a day for women - mothers specifically. The first known "Mother's Day" gathering was on June 2nd, 1872 in New York City and it was an anti-war protest in which she read a proclamation which included these words:

Arise, then, women of this day!
Arise, all women who have hearts,
Whether our baptism be of water or of tears!

Say firmly:

"We will not have great questions decided by irrelevant agencies,
Our husbands will not come to us, reeking with carnage, for caresses and applause.
Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn
All that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy and patience.

We, the women of one country, will be too tender of those of another country
To allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs....

As men have often forsaken the plough and the anvil at the summons of war,
Let women now leave all that may be left of home for a great and earnest day of counsel.

Let them meet first, as women, to bewail and commemorate the dead.
Let them solemnly take counsel with each other as to the means
Whereby the great human family can live in peace,
Each bearing after his own time the sacred impress, not of Caesar,
But of God.

How's that for a Mother's Day sermon? But it did not happen overnight. Julia Ward Howe wrote both those words I just read and the Battle Hymn of the Republic. She wrote *both* of them. How does one write a song we see now as the example of militant Christianity AND write that Mother's Day Proclamation? Well, the same way that one fully embraces the call of Jesus to "love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you" and rejoices at the murder of Osama bin Laden. Or the same way that one's timidity being revealed by denying his membership in the "Jesus Club" three times turns, in Peter, into a passionate and courageous defense of the Good news. The world is a complicated place, and sometimes we, as human beings, find it within us to do something different.

The people to whom Peter is speaking are not unlike us. They are entrenched in political systems, engaged in a world that works and doesn't work for them and governed by a set of values and norms. They were confronted with their own hypocrisy on a daily basis, just as we are. This is why when they finally see that Peter is telling them about God in a way that they never expected they are "cut to the quick". Have you ever had that happen? You know, you're trimming your nails and you go too far or - and let's just say that this is a hypothetical example not something that actually happened to me - you step on a Lego in the middle of the night and ram your big toe into the face of a stair step, splitting your toenail into the quick. Getting into the quick is painful and it bleeds forever...like a small wound with big ideas.

It's not devastating, not overwhelming - but it sure does sting and you know it as soon as you've done it. These people, meet head-on with their own complicity, feel that sting. They are no friends of the empire, yet they are its consort in ways they don't even appreciate. They are, like we are, resistant to and compliant with the empire.

And Peter is saying to them - yes, I know...but what if? What if that guy that was a nobody peasant from Nazareth - nothing good ever comes from Nazareth - what if he really is the One? What if what he taught us - be kind to one another, give generously, love wastefully and pledge yourselves to be non-violent - what if that really is all there is to it? What if?

Those gathered ask him - OK, how do we get to "what if"? And Peter tells them that they must repent - a word in Greek that Eugene Peterson quite rightly translates as a phrase - "change your life". It literally means to "turn around". It's a word that I don't think Peter really understood until after Easter. He was a primary follower of Jesus - one of the original twelve - and he took years to understand what Jesus was talking about...the "rock" upon which the church was built? Well, he was slow to turn.

Turn to God, he says, and be baptized - enter into a new life, with all of your past episodes of missing the mark forgiven. Receive the gift of the Holy Spirit - which is the gift of being alive to the moment, the gift of being open to change, the gift of turning. Do not let your life and will be dictated any longer by the empire, but hold to the values of God - compassion, generosity, hopeful life and endless grace. Stand up even when it seems like what you are doing is standing against your best interest, even when what you say or do means relinquishing comfort - for the Holy Spirit is not always about comfort, but about life. Let *that* be your compass. This is why Christianity is a practice. Notice that Peter never tells them that they have to believe anything...he says, here is what you must *do*. Christianity, in its best form, is a practice for we are not born into a world of compassion, generosity, hope or wasteful love. We must reprogram ourselves to see the world in a different way. We must be born again, in the least evangelical and most true way that I can think of it.

This church spent a hot day fixing up a stranger's house yesterday. We didn't have to. We all had other places we might rather have been. And although we have done this for 20 years now, I can't help but emphasize how remarkable this is. We forget that it is. We just show up and do it. It is part of the routine. But we learned by working together that we can make an impact in ways that don't make sense to the mainstream flow of life. What's wrong with this person? Why can't she fix up her own house? Where are her bootstraps? Tell her to start pulling. When we worked with Rebuilding Together we weren't motivated by love for this woman, Mrs. Smith, though we grew to appreciate her quiet kindness. We weren't getting a paycheck - as the Rebuilding Together slogan on the t-shirts says, "Some jobs don't pay in cash". We were there because we all feel, at some level, a responsibility for one another, and obligation to help when we can help. We have all learned that same thing from many places, Rebuilding Together being one of them.

We have just reshaped ourselves. Not an overnight epiphany, but the slow steady work of the Spirit. We stood yesterday against a common ethos which would have us believe that we are all just islands who happen to meet once in awhile. We participated in *community*, a faint but crucial concept these days. And we do that here at church intentionally - at Whiz Kids, at Taft, at 363, in Nicaragua, cooking food for Mobile Meals, coming here to worship in ways that include our doubts and allow our questions...we are practicing our faith. It is what church should be about - providing opportunities and experiences that make us question the assumptions.

We have a new opportunity this Mother's Day to challenge another assumption. A chance to live this day to its original intent, not enslaved by the greeting card industry or limited to flowers and brunch, but honoring our mothers by working for what all mothers long for - a

world of peace. We are called to reach for that peace not by using the same old tools of fear and hatred pointed a different direction, but by committing ourselves to all new methods. Almost a week after the demise of our most wanted enemy - the face of terror and , unfortunately, of Islam for a decade - we have a chance to do something different. Don't cheer in the streets, but retreat to your own heart. Let us see in this death the imprint of our own complicity, the results of participating in what Dr. King called the "descending spiral of violence". Dr. King , who quoted often from the Battle Hymn of the Republic, said that violence "begets the very thing it seeks to destroy...Through violence you may murder the hater, but you do not murder hate. In fact, violence merely increases hate...Returning hate for hate multiplies hate...Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that."

These first "Mother's Day" mothers knew that we cannot simply continue to do the same things we've always done and expect different results. There is a name for that. Instead we must truly be "born again" to a new way of being in the world complete with a new set of values that we will do more than just give lip service to but actually use as a guiding force in our lives.

In a recent blog post the General Minister and President of our sister denomination, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), The Rev. Dr. Sharon Watkins said this about reaction to Osama bin Laden's death:

"I understand that Jesus' way is impossibly idealistic. But there is an idealism of violence that should be recognized as well. It was hate and violence that created Bin Laden in the first place. New instances of destruction and loss will result from his violent death. The relief and rejoicing of the moment will give way to sorrow another day."

Peter is announcing to these people gathered in Jerusalem nothing less than the re-ordering of the world. He is announcing his conviction of something that we are still realizing - the indwelling of God's Kingdom into our own.

That's when Peter stood up and, backed by the other eleven, spoke out with bold urgency: "Fellow Jews, all of you who are visiting Jerusalem, listen carefully and get this story straight...Jesus the Nazarene, a man thoroughly accredited by God to you—the miracles and wonders and signs that God did through him are common knowledge—this Jesus, following the deliberate and well-thought-out plan of God, was betrayed by men who took the law into their own hands, and was handed over to you. And you pinned him to a cross and killed him. But God untied the death ropes and raised him up. Death was no match for him... Peter said, "Change your life. Turn to God and be baptized, each of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, so your sins are forgiven. Receive the gift of the Holy Spirit...Get out while you can; get out of this sick and stupid culture!"

We had an opportunity immediately after 9/11 to choose a different path. We did not. But we have another chance here. The death of bin Laden represents, even if only iconically, the end of an era. We have a new chance to relate to Islam, a new chance to represent what our primary drivers of change will be and a new chance to demonstrate that we will be geared towards

justice for all people, not just selective justice. We have, until this time, dramatically altered many of our core values in response to terrorism. We have a chance to say to the terrorists that they may try and instill fear in us, but we will not bend to their will, nor will we stoop to their level. Where they squash freedom with fear, we will praise and support the birth of freedom. Where they demonstrate arrogance and intolerance, we will practice humility and celebrate our diversity. Where they believe that some people count more than others, we will advance human rights as our primary doctrine.

And, above all, we will not continue a system in which we act like we're God's chosen people and our means justify our ends in all cases. This is the mindset of Osama bin Laden. We don't defeat it by being it, only with more firepower. We defeat it by giving the world an alternative. We drive out hate by being love. We will rise up, as Julia Ward Howe asked us to, to bear the sacred impress not of Caesar, but of God.

I'm not asking you to mourn the man, but I am asking you to mourn the means. I am asking us all to take a moment to see what kind of world we live in and what steps we are taking to change that world if we are at all dissatisfied with it. I am asking us all, myself included, to consider that although we may rejoice that no more innocent lives will be ended because of Osama bin Laden, that he does not hold the monopoly on evil. We all live with evil and good in us, judgment and grace, hatred and love. And our call as Christians is to remember what comes from God – and what doesn't – and to choose God's plan, even when that seems difficult.

No one said that being a follower of Jesus was easy – including Jesus. But what if we decided to take some of that motherly spirit that Julia Ward Howe spoke of and throw it into the mix? What if, instead of carnations on Mother's Day, we handed out baptisms that wake us up to a new world as if it is already here, if we will only choose it? What if, right after brunch, we recommit ourselves to manifesting God's Reign and trying to help create a world that we could all be proud of...a world that would make any mother happy? What if?

Happy Mother's Day to all mothers of all kinds, and to the mothers in us all.

AMEN