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I Am/We Are: A Series on Jesus' "I Am" Statements IV. The Resurrection and the Life: A Mothers Day Reflection

John 11:25-26 The Message "You don't have to wait for the End. I am, right now, Resurrection and Life. The one who believes in me, even though he or she dies, will live. And everyone who lives believing in me does not ultimately die at all. Do you believe this?"

This statement from Jesus, the latest in our sermon series on his "I am" statements in the gospel of John, is not one we would normally associate with Mothers Day, is it? No, I suspect that many of us hear this scripture – particularly in its more traditional translation, "*I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live....*" – and associate it with funerals. And that's an apt and appropriate thing, for the reason we have Christian funerals and memorial services is precisely to proclaim the fact that even death will not defeat God and that in some way, some fashion we can indeed trust God to cherish and love forever the life of one now gone whom we have loved on earth. That is certainly part of its original context, when Jesus addressed these words to Martha after the death of her brother Lazarus. And yet, this morning, I want to also tell you why this scripture is indeed apt for this American holiday that we celebrate today.

Do you know the history of Mothers Day? It was first proposed by a woman who indeed had seen far too many occasions for these words of Jesus to be read over far too many graves, when far too many young men had perished in the cruelest of ways during the American Civil War. Julia Ward Howe, who had a few years earlier, written the stirring song "Battle Hymn of the Republic" later became heartsick at just how many lives continued to be lost from that war and wars that yet continued around the world. Well over one-million men had died or been wounded in the Civil War, almost four

percent of the American population at the time,¹ and Ms. Howe became overwhelmed at the magnitude of such loss and at her own role in it. In 1870 she penned an open letter entitled "Appeal to womanhood throughout the world"; here is some of what it said:

Arise, all women who have hearts, Whether your baptism be that of water or of tears ! Say firmly: ...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, women of one country, will be too tender of those of another country, to allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs..... ...the mother has a sacred and commanding word to say to the sons who owe their life to her suffering.²

Her own experience of the power of mothering love in the face of too much death led her to become a pacifist - a stance, by the way, that virtually every Christian also held in the first two centuries of the Church's life. But whether or not that is your conviction, her words eloquently remind us that indeed every life in this room owes itself to a love that came forth from pain. Every life in this room is held and nurtured and loved by God – as is every life in this world – with a love that wants for each and every one a life that is marked by peace not suffering, a life that is imbued by purpose and hope, not cynicism and violence, a life that is lived making the world a better place.

You see, we rightly read Jesus' words at funerals to affirm the life that is lived eternally, but we sometimes forget that those words are also reminding us about the kind of life God wants for us in the here and the now. That's why I am so drawn to Petersen's translation of those words that Chris read for us: *"You don't have to wait for the End. I am, right now, Resurrection and Life."* Jesus says to you and to me *"I am offering you always the love of God that wants for you new and resurrected life not just*

¹<http://www.civilwar.org/education/civil-war-casualties.html>

²http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mother%27s_Day_Proclamation

in eternity, but even and always now.” Julia Ward Howe’s words, though, remind us that neither resurrection nor new life ever comes without pain. We don’t need to rehearse the pain that Jesus went through before his resurrection testified to that fact. And I don’t need to rehearse in detail the pain that comes with physical birth. Barbara’s and my birthing class teacher once said, in a line that can still make us laugh, that “Some women experience some degree of discomfort when giving birth.” No, new life of ever sort very rarely comes without some experience of pain.

Perhaps you are one who is trying to break out of a long-established role in your family and give that job someone else; it comes with some pain doesn’t it? Maybe you’ve been a part of a long friendship but now the two of you have grown so different and so apart that you need to move on so that old expectations and habits and assumptions no longer stifle your God-given purpose; that comes with some pain, doesn’t it? Maybe your childhood had experiences that weren’t what they should have been and you finally want to be free of the wounds that you have carried so that you don’t unintentionally pass them on; that comes with some pain, doesn’t it? Maybe it’s simply the case that you are feeling restless, feeling like you are not exercising your gifts in the ways that you could, that you could be or do so much more and so are taking steps to do a new thing, become a new person; that indeed comes with some pain, doesn’t it? Maybe your work, which once was a passion, is now more and more merely a job and you find yourself longing for not just a job, not just a career even, but a vocation where you can satisfy a calling; such new birth comes with some pain, doesn’t it?

If that is you, Jesus’ words this morning are for you: *“You don’t have to wait for the End. I am, right now....Life.”* Now. **Now.** That’s a pretty urgent word, isn’t it? There’s a joke going around Facebook that goes like this: “When a man tells you he will do something, there’s no need to nag him about it every six months.” No, as my

mother used to say when I had put her off one too many times: “Now!! Now means now.” That’s what Jesus is saying, now means now. If you would take him up on his offer for new life, re-born life, then now is a good time to accept that offer. It may not mean that change, new life, new birth happens utterly at once, but it can and does mean that you can begin to take those steps that would lead to new life. Now.

What makes Jesus’ words, though, different from any other “self-help” expressions that you can find everywhere these days? What makes what he is offering different from the motivational posters that fill our Facebook and Pinterest pages? Just this: The offer of new life, even in the midst of what will sometimes be painful, is always surrounded by, backed up by, undergirded by a God who through Christ loves us in ways that can make possible the steps we could never take alone. And this, by the way, is why we need both mother and father images for God. New life is never easy and to know that God is both mother and father to us makes that life ever more possible. Let me quote the wisest preacher I know, Rev. Barbara Blaisdell:

Jesus knows that we need both mothers and fathers in our lives, church mothers and fathers, mothers and fathers of choice as well as our biological mothers and fathers. He knows that there is something in us that needs father God, strong and caring. And he knows that there is something in us that needs mother God, nurturing and welcoming.³

After all, she continues “Jesus himself used both father and mother images for both himself and for God.” In that usage, Jesus is simply following much of the Hebrew tradition: For example, In the prophet Isaiah, God is described as in “labor to deliver the new creation of justice” and as a mother who comforts those who mourn. The prophet

³Rev. Barbara S. Blaisdell, initial draft of a sermon entitled “Living Toward Wholeness: Recognizing the Wholeness of God,” May 10, 2015, First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Tacoma, Washington.

Hosea says that God will never, ever forget the children of her womb.⁴ And whether these images are ones that you are familiar with or ones that most speak to you, the point of these and many more is indeed that our God is one who is with us in every way, with all the strengths of both mothers and fathers, with all the traits that both men and women bring to their lives and their work and their loves. It is that God, mother and father of us all, who indeed gives Jesus' instruction to seek new life even amidst pain its power and its punch and its truth. It is that God who is so much more than one more motivational self-help slogan. It is that God who is there with us in the birthing room of new possibilities for our lives, coaching us, urging us, loving us, leading us, knowing us, and cheering us on.

What can happen when we take Jesus at his word? What can happen when we accept his offer of new life, when we believe him and act as if we believe him when he says that new life is possible even now, even now? Well, to quote Barbara's powerful words again, just as with the woman to whom Jesus addressed his words,

...we are likewise called to a wholeness, to thrive and come to be ourselves in combinations and in ways we cannot now imagine, if we but continue to listen and to hear. We are called to be more than even our best maternal selves, even more than our bearing wombs and our suckling breasts. We are called to be more than our paternal selves, more than deep voice and strength. After hearing the word of God, obedience lies in becoming women and men of justice, women and men of peace, women and men marked by their mercy-filled love.⁵

Men and women of justice and peace and mercy-filled love.

And, my friends, that is so, so different from what our culture teaches us, and it is those teachings that are part of why Mothers Day can be so difficult, so fraught, so

⁴Cf. <http://www.godweb.org/mothersday2.htm>

⁵Blaisdell, *Ibid.*

mixed, leaving so many feeling like they can't measure up to the Hallmark vision of perfection that is everywhere before us. For, as a preacher by the name of Charles Henderson says,

We live in a world which makes us feel inadequate and incomplete. Despite the almost total fascination with self fulfillment and personal success, we are left with the feeling of dissatisfaction and failure, simply because we can never live up to the ideal of perfection projected throughout the culture. Despite all our frantic efforts we will never be thin enough, or rich enough, or young enough, or smart enough, or loving enough....⁶

So what's the answer? Well, Pastor Henderson goes on to tell us:

The one thing that can address this situation and brake this stalemate of the spirit is the sense that we are loved, not despite our shortcomings, or because of our achievements, but simply because we are of immeasurable value to God.⁷

My friends, this morning let me ask you: who are the men and women, the mothers and the fathers, whether by biology or by choice, who have surrounded you with such love? Call them to mind, for they indeed have shown you the God who loves you like a perfect parent, and who therefore can also free you to seek that new life Jesus is promising you as you ever more become those men, women, and children of justice, and peace, and mercy-filled love. When, you say? Now, now, now!

⁶<http://www.godweb.org/mothersday2.htm>

⁷<http://www.godweb.org/mothersday2.htm>