

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
May 12, 2024 – The Seventh Sunday of Easter
Julian of Norwich and Mother's Day
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

More than six hundred years ago a woman in England began to have visions of Christ. She was ill – it was thought near death – and her priest gave her Last Rites. But suddenly, on the seventh day of her illness, all pain left her, and she had sixteen visions of the Passion of Christ. The first occurred when her priest held a crucifix before her eyes, and she saw blood trickling down the face of Jesus. The woman was Julian of Norwich. On our liturgical calendar we honor Julian on May 8th.

Julian did not die then but lived for many years as a holy solitary in a cell attached to a parish church in Norwich, England. Many people sought her out for spiritual counsel. She reflected deeply on her visions of Christ and left a written record of her visions and reflections, in a work known as “Revelations of Divine Love.” This work has comforted and inspired unknown numbers of Christians. Julian has been especially important to women because she so beautifully adds the feminine to our images and metaphors for God.

You may be surprised to hear what Julian writes about Jesus: “Jesus Christ, who opposes good to evil, is our true Mother. We have our being from Him, where the foundation of motherhood begins, with all the sweet protection of love which endlessly follows. As truly as God is our Father, so truly is God our Mother. ... Our true Mother Jesus bears us for joy and for endless life, blessed may He be. ... Our precious Mother Jesus can feed us with Himself, and does, most courteously and most tenderly, with the Blessed Sacrament [the Eucharist], which is the precious food of true life.”

In medieval Europe, there was a legend that the pelican was particularly attentive to her young, to the point of wounding her own breast to provide them with her blood as food when no other food was available. As a result, since about the 12th century, the pelican became a symbol of Christ's sacrifice of himself for humanity and a symbol of the Eucharist. Jesus our true Mother.

Julian's image may sound startling to us because we are accustomed to the image of God as Father, not Jesus as Mother. But Julian is saying just what we affirm in our creeds and in our liturgy – that all things came to being through Jesus Christ, that through Jesus we have eternal life and joy, that Christ feeds us with his body and blood in the Holy Eucharist. What she adds is a dimension of tenderness and sweetness in the love of Jesus that we are not always aware of. Bless her for that!

In the church we affirm the truth that God may be revealed to us through other human beings and in relationship with other human beings. We believe this to be possible in our families and friendships and in groups of Christians gathered together in the church. In these relationships we have the opportunity to live with others in love, in compassion. We have the

opportunity to live out what we call the Golden Rule, “to do to others what we would have them do to us,” by serving others so that they might grow and flourish. In the church we believe that God may surely be revealed in human relationships and in the lives of individual human beings.

Today we honor mothers and the relationship between mothers and children. Some of us have been blessed in these relationships, blessed to know love and to see God revealed, blessed with the opportunity to live and grow in a loving relationship. All our human relationships are flawed and imperfect, because all human beings are flawed and imperfect, but if love and goodness have predominated in your experiences of the mother/child relationship, then now is the perfect time to thank God for your abundant blessings.

For some people, however, this relationship has been and is what might certainly be called “ungodly.” If you don’t know this from experience, then you may know it from what you read and hear about child abuse and elder abuse, or from the experience of someone you know. I believe that in the church we need to acknowledge the whole truth about life, and we need to embrace people whose experience has been painful, people who are marginalized and hurt by secular sentimentality. The church should be a place where people feel safe to open their hearts to God, a place where we treat one another with gentleness and care.

Most important of all, the church is the place where we proclaim that God is love, that no matter what our earthly parent/child relationships are or have been, God is our Father and God is our Mother. We are God’s children, and God’s love for us has no limit. This is a message of good news for all of us, but especially good news for people who have not been blessed with love in their families.

There is one condition or commandment in our relationship with God – and it is a commandment voiced over and over again in Holy Scripture – love. It is love that binds Jesus to the Father. It is love that binds us to Jesus. It is love that binds us to one another. Jesus teaches us that love is the very essence and content of his relationship with the Father. Love is the commandment of God. Jesus has made this known to his disciples, to us.

In his Gospel Mark reports an occasion when Jesus was teaching. “Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, ‘Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.’ And he replied, ‘Who are my mother and my brothers?’ And looking at those who sat around him, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers!’ Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother” (Mark 3:31-35).

If we abide in the love of Christ and choose to live with compassion and in active service of one another, then we may enjoy a closeness with God that is beyond the deepest of human relationships we might have. As you may know in your heart, this is the closeness we long for most deeply. As we walk in love each day, we come closer to God. We affirm our tie to God as we seek to do God’s will. May the day come when Jesus says to us, to you and to me, “Here is my mother. Here is my brother. Here is my sister.” In the name of Jesus, our loving Mother. Amen.