

Celebration of Women
May 12, 2024
Rev. Anna Hubbard

The Daughters of Zelophehad

27 Then the daughters of Zelophehad came forward. Zelophehad was son of Hopher son of Gilead son of Machir son of Manasseh son of Joseph, a member of the Manassite clans. The names of his daughters were: Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah. **2** They stood before Moses, Eleazar the priest, the leaders, and all the congregation, at the entrance of the tent of meeting, and they said, **3** “Our father died in the wilderness; he was not among the company of those who gathered themselves together against the LORD in the company of Korah, but died for his own sin; and he had no sons. **4** Why should the name of our father be taken away from his clan because he had no son? Give to us a possession among our father’s brothers.”

5 Moses brought their case before the LORD. **6** And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: **7** The daughters of Zelophehad are right in what they are saying; you shall indeed let them possess an inheritance among their father’s brothers and pass the inheritance of their father on to them. **8** You shall also say to the Israelites, “If a man dies, and has no son, then you shall pass his inheritance on to his daughter. **9** If he has no daughter, then you shall give his inheritance to his brothers. **10** If he has no brothers, then you shall give his inheritance to his father’s brothers. **11** And if his father has no brothers, then you shall give his inheritance to the nearest kinsman of his clan, and he shall possess it. It shall be for the Israelites a statute and ordinance, as the LORD commanded Moses.”

Mother’s Day as an adult has always been tricky for me. For a long time, Travis and I were told not to even attempt to have children because of the ways in which my lupus affects my kidneys and how hard a pregnancy can be on your kidneys. I remember fielding all the questions as everyone expected that surely, we would have had kids by now, knowing the longing in my heart and the reality of the situation. And even as difficult as that was, it became even more tricky after the birth of Hadley. For those that don’t know, I am a child of adoption. In 1985, in a closed adoption the infant was whisked away to their adoptive family, so at 3 days old I was brought home to the only people I have ever known to be my mom and my dad. Really, I came home to my sister who at 6, insisted she hold me and was only willing to give me up if I needed a new diaper. Growing up, the story of my adoption was always shared with me. But, in a closed adoption my parents didn’t have much to tell me about my birth parents. I knew that they had chosen my family out of 3 families because in Sarah, I would have a sibling, and because my parents were involved in the church which was important to my birth mother. However, that was about all the information I had.

In college, I connected with my birth parents. And we, for many years, had a friendly relationship in which we saw each other on the holidays and checked in throughout the year. I was able to meet my siblings and my cousins. Some of whom I am still in contact with today. At some point the relationship with my birth parents faded away at no fault of either party. In 2014, I found out that Pat, my birthmother, was on hospice and then had died of cancer quickly after. In 2017, I gave birth to Hadley on the day after what would have been Pat’s birthday. And

when she was just 3 days old, I remember holding Hadley and thinking about Pat. What it must have been like for her those short first days of my life. The mix of emotions she had to be feeling. How she could never have known in that moment what a gift she was giving me. I remember too, looking down at Hadley and being washed in the grief of knowing that while we hadn't really been close, I would never have the opportunity to introduce her to this sweet perfect baby, this baby that was never supposed to be, this baby that shared both of our noses. So, Mother's Day has always been nuanced. I have a wonderful mother. And wonderful mother figures and yet, I always had this other unknown mother. Or this other estranged mother, or this other gone too soon mother.

Because of my experiences, I've become more sensitive to others for whom Mother's Day is painful.

For women who would give anything to overcome their battles with infertility so they can become mothers.

For women who would be mothers if they had partners with whom to raise them.

For women whose children have died.

For women who have suffered miscarriages and infant loss.

For women who have never become mothers in the first place. Whether you've noticed it or not, we live in a world where women are rewarded and validated for being mothers. People assume that non mothers just haven't become mothers yet.

For those of us with difficult relationships with our mothers.

For mothers who have put their children up for adoption.

For mothers who feel they were forced into motherhood.

For children who are estranged from their mothers. For children and adults for whom their mother was their abuser.

For mothers who are estranged from their children.

And for those of us with deep grief for mother's or grandmothers who have died. That's why Kelley isn't here today. On the heels of her own mother's death leading a service – even if we shift the narrative to be about women – today was just too much.

And so Mother's day is tricky and nuanced, for these reasons, and more that I am sure I missed. And in church it is even more so, because we live in community. Some of us, for instance, want to celebrate today and the women who raised them to be who they are, while for others of us today is difficult, and is a day to endure and get through. But wherever we land on that spectrum I think we can all agree that what we all want is for this space to be a place where no one feels excluded, or less than, or unsafe. And so, today, instead of skirting the whole thing – and instead of having an all-out celebration of mothers ignoring the grief that accompanies the celebration for those sitting next to us, I wanted to just name all that exists. I wanted to shine a light on the hard and the messy as much as on the gratitude and the joy. I want to name today that like me; you have a story. Maybe it's a story of joy for your mother, and maybe it's an experience of the heartache this day evokes. Wherever you land today I want you to know that this space and this community – is strong enough and big enough to hold it all. Your grief and your joy. The nuance and the questions. Today no matter how you have arrived I want to name that you are not alone.

And also – I wonder – I wonder if this day with its commercialization and heaviness might be redeemed if we used it to reflect on the state of mothers, mothering, and motherhood

in the world. Kelley mentioned that she shared this with you all before but as a refresher, the origin of Mother's Day wasn't about cards and flowers and pedicures and brunch. The original women who organized Mother's Day Clubs did so with a sense of purpose. Julia Ward Howe, the founder of Mother's Day in 1870 wanted it to be a day of peace to honor mothers who had lost sons and brothers and husbands in the Civil War, and a time for mothers to work together to end all war. It was meant to be a day to speak out about injustice, it was meant to be a day of action. In 1967, [Lorriane Schneider](#) a mother of four children, followed in the steps of Julia Ward Howe when she created a poster that would become the icon of the anti-war movement. Schneider's poster went on to become the symbol for the non-partizan, antiwar group [Another Mother for Peace](#). The group's first action, in 1967, was to organize a mass sending of Mother's Day cards to congress and the President.

The card read:

*For my Mother's Day gift this year,
I don't want candy or flowers.
I want an end to killing.
We who have given life
must be dedicated to preserving it.
Please talk peace.*

Initially they printed 1000 cards. Two months later 200,000 cards had been sent. From this beginning *Another Mother for Peace* evolved into a powerful voice for peace that ultimately helped move the national debate on the war in Vietnam toward a peaceful solution.

In today's scripture God seeks justice and care for these daughters. God makes sure that they are protected and taken care of. God ensures their livelihood. God flips what was the norm in a culture in which women were given absolutely no power or security, except through men, and secures their place and their safety within the community. What God does here is counter cultural. What God does here, I think points to the heart God has for women. And so, I wonder what the God of justice would have to say about the way the world is today for women, and mothers, and children? And I wonder what call God would issue to us, to bring about change, to offer voice to the voiceless, to protect the least of these, and to bring about peace?

Wil Gafney, womanist theologian asks of us this:

On this Mother's Day, do we know how many women and girls die in childbirth around the world including in these United States? Do we know that black women are more likely to die during childbirth?

On this Mother's Day, do you know that in the US the infant mortality rate is at an all-time high?

On this Mother's Day, do we know how women's healthcare concerns continue to take a back seat by those in power?

On this Mother's Day, do you know how many mothers have lost daughters and sons to trafficking?

On this Mother's Day – do we know that here in the US having children lowers a woman's employment rate?

On this Mother's Day do we know that in the US women are still paid less than men? And that the pay gap worsens with age?

On this Mother's Day, do we know how many girls and women are raped into motherhood on a regular and recurring tactics of warfare?

On this Mother's Day, do we know how many girl-children, some as young as eight, are sold, bartered and traded into marriage with grown men, often as old as their fathers and grandfathers?

On this Mother's Day, do you know how many women are forced to bring unwanted pregnancies to term because of the cultural, religious and political values of men and sometimes women who control their sexuality and fertility?

On this Mother's Day do we know the risk inherent in being a girl or woman on display in particular ways in parts of the world?

On this mother's day do we know how difficult and expensive it is to find safe and reliable childcare?

On this Mother's Day do we know that the leading cause of death in children aged 3-18 is firearms? Do we know that there are more mass shootings in the US than there are days of the year? Do we plan to just continue to let the traumatization of active shooter drills be the new normal for our children?

On this Mother's Day are we remembering children and women in Gaza?

On this Mother's Day do we know that child workers are being killed in US factories?

On this Mother's Day are we protecting all of the children? Are we protecting black and brown children who are dying at the hands of racism and violence?

On this mother's day do we know that women are often seen as less trustworthy than men. That when we do tell our stories, we're more likely to be written off as hormonal, hysterical, irrational, or simply ill-informed.

And this friends, is just the tip of the iceberg of the things we should probably be aware of on this Mother's Day.

What I hope for us on this Mother's day is that we will hear the ways in which God ensures the future of four sisters, I hope we will hear the cries of our foremothers and with our voices and our hands and our feet create a world that is safer and more just for women and children.

Because I can tell you...

For my Mother's Day this year,

We don't want candy or flowers.

We want an end to killing.

We want all the children to be safe and loved and cherished.

We want our sisters to be uplifted, believed, respected, and honored.

We who have given life

are dedicated to preserving it.

What we want this year – is peace.

Here is what I know friends, God's longing for peace, for healing, for equality, it outpaces ours. For God has already shown us the ways of the kingdom of God, and God is already working alongside us for the peace and justice we long for.

God hears our cries for the freedom for which we long.

God knows we long for the day when women can rejoice in the many iterations of our bodies.

God is already working to bring about the day when all women walk with their heads high.

God is already at work for the day women can speak and be heard.

God is already at work for the day when all women live free from fear in their homes.

God is already at work for the day when we do not grieve for our children.

God is already at work for the day where every single child is safe.

God is already weeping for our loss and for our sadness. God knows our despair over broken relationships and loss. God is with us.

So, this Mother's Day let us join God and our foremothers, let us work for the day God is already creating.

Sarah Ruden says, "love is manically verb centered." But you know what? So is mothering. Active verbs show the heart of an active God. It is through the active verb of love that we know what God looks like, and I would argue that the other active verbs show us a piece of God too. Nurturing, instructing, protecting, disciplining, nursing, serving, calming, enjoying, challenging, teaching, cleaning, entertaining, worrying, singing, playing, fighting, working, speaking. This Mother's Day, we would do well to take inspiration from Julia Ward Howe and embrace the uniquely powerful role we all play in driving transformational change for a better world. May we all get to work – in celebration and sorrow – to create a world that is safer for women and children. May we be about the work of peace. For when we do that work, we honor the life of all. Amen.