

“The First Mother’s Day”

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Lawrence Park Community Church

Today is Mother’s Day, a time for brunches, flowers, zoom calls and get togethers. For many people, this may be the first time in two years that Mother’s Day has been celebrated in person. The pandemic has kept grown children apart from their mothers. It has also imposed a steep toll on mothers with children still in the house. When school shifted to the home, it was most often mothers who changed their schedules and even lost work to accommodate home learning. As much as our society talks of making parenting something which is equally shared between fathers and mothers, the reality is that women withdrew from the workforce in record numbers, usually to care for children who were suddenly at home all the time.¹ Mothers have had a hard two years, and it may take years to recover.

That link between children and their mothers is not just chance, of course. Mothers are the ones who get pregnant and have children, and usually provide most of the care for infants. Infants come to associate their mothers with safety, physically and emotionally. Scientists have found that breast feeding in particular induces a kind of chemical love affair between mother and child through the stimulation of certain neurochemicals in both of them.² Those same chemicals, and the feeling that goes with them, can be rediscovered when we fall in love as adults.³ For children, the conviction that mothers are a source of physical and emotional safety starts in infancy and continues for a lifetime.

In today’s Psalm we hear an echo of that feeling of safety. The 23rd Psalm opens with those famous words, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” The psalmist imagines being a sheep being led by God the shepherd. This is clearly a metaphor, since humans have no idea what sheep think about shepherds. It is

¹ Joan C. Williams, “Op-Ed: Why moms have it so much harder than dads during COVID time,” *Los Angeles Times*, Feb 7, 2021

² <https://parentingscience.com/oxytocin-in-children-and-parents/>

³ https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/275795#the_love_hormone

possible that they resent being led around by a human all the time. Instead, it seems more likely that the psalmist is channeling that sense of security that we receive when in our mother's arms. That feeling of being totally safe, fed and cared for which we experience as small children. The psalm would have worked just as well if it had started with the words, "The Lord is my mother, I shall not want."

Most of mothering does not involve these moments of bliss, of course. Infancy is also about crying, unsatisfied babies. As children get older, the moments of bliss come less frequently. Kids need a lot of help and love to become adults. They have a hard time seeing the sense in much of what adult life demands. This leads to tears, to anger, to misunderstandings, and resentments, often directed at mothers. In this sense, mothering, and fathering, is like shepherding reluctant sheep, and this stage lasts for a long time. What starts out as the basic need to keep an infant alive splinters into a thousand complex pieces as children grow up, which even therapists struggle to understand. There is nothing simple about anyone's relationship with their mothers.

This week, mothering became even more complicated when the media reported on a leak from the U.S. Supreme Court. The court has been in deliberations about the legality of abortion. The court appears to be ready to strike down two previous rulings, and to give the control of abortion laws back to the individual states. This will result in 26 states severely rolling back abortion services, and in many cases, banning them entirely.⁴ The central issue will become who gets to decide whether a woman becomes a mother – the woman who is pregnant, or the government? Some states, like Texas, have already passed legislation which allows citizens to report on women who seek abortions, and even charge anyone who helps them get an out of state abortion. Other states are looking to adopt similar legislation. If motherhood starts out inspiring a state of bliss, it now seems poised to become a time of suspicion, dread and potential jail time for women who decide they do not want to be mothers at this moment.

It may seem inappropriate to bring up such a difficult subject on Mother's Day. This is supposed to be a day of love and respect. That hardest decisions we should be making today is where we should park for brunch. But what we expect of Mother's Day now is very different from how this day began.

⁴ <https://www.cnn.com/2022/05/03/us/state-abortion-trigger-laws-roe-v-wade-overturned/index.html>

Mother's Day is an American invention. We can credit this woman,



Ann Jarvis for its invention. She lived in West Virginia.⁵ In 1858 she started what she called “Mothers’ Workdays.”⁶

Mothers were invited to join her in cleaning up the town’s sanitation to reduce the infant mortality rate. These became annual events and widened to helping mothers with tuberculosis. During the Civil War, her Mothers Days led to women serving as nurses to soldiers on both sides of the war when they were encamped in her area. After the war, she organized Mothers’ Days to help soldiers from both sides gather together in the same room each year with their mothers to heal the emotional wounds of the war.⁷ Her idea caught on elsewhere in the country. Mothers Days became the occasion for annual peace marches.

It was Jarvis’ daughter, Anna, who lobbied to have it declared a national day. Multiple states and provinces were already observing it by the time the American Congress approved it in 1914.⁸ Canada followed suit the next year. But there was a shift. What started out as a day for all mothers, became a day for individual mothers. Florists got involved. So did greeting card companies. Then restaurants. The peace marches that once happened on Mothers Day were sidelined by a more sentimental view of the day, where individual mothers were celebrated by their children. What mothers wanted for the world became secondary and was then forgotten as part of Mother’s Day. This infuriated Anna Jarvis. She and her

⁵ Fiona Tinwei Lam, “Mother’s Day’s Radical Roots,” TheTyee.ca, 6 May 2011

⁶ Liza Featherstone, “Mother’s Day Has Deeply Radical Roots,” *Jacobin*, 05.09.21.

⁷ Fiona Tinwei Lam, “Mother’s Day’s Radical Roots,” TheTyee.ca, 6 May 2011

⁸ Liza Featherstone,

sister spent years lobbying for the end of mothers' day, even launching lawsuits, feeling it had drifted too far from the interests of mothers for a better world.⁹

Today, it may seem naïve to believe that Mothers Day could ever stand for the interests of all mothers. Mothers do not come in one size, or with one set of unified values. However, Ann Jarvis invented Mother's Day because she felt that the interests of mothers were not being heard by men and male lawmakers. In our time, laws are being written about abortion that speak of fetal rights, heartbeats, and viability, but the perspectives of mothers themselves are seldom mentioned. What would the abortion issue look like if we took Jarvis' approach? What if we asked mothers why they want abortions?

Many studies have asked that question, and the answers are surprising. In the United States, almost half of all women who seek abortions are poor. Almost half live at or below the poverty line. About sixty percent of women who seek abortions in the U.S. are mothers who already have children.¹⁰ Although single women do seek out abortions for various reasons, they are in the minority. Most women who want abortions are poor and having another child will place a serious burden on their family's ability to get by. Women seek out abortions for all sorts of reasons – teens get pregnant before they can support a family, some women are raped, others live in households with abusive partners, while others simply can't afford another child right now. Women also get abortions based on medical advice in case of high-risk pregnancies. Abortions are usually sought as a solution to a highly pressing problem that will affect a woman's well being in the years to come.

When states deny abortion services, mothers suffer. Abortion is not free in the U.S. like it is here. Federal funds don't cover it, and many private insurance companies don't either. So poor women living near or below the poverty line need to find 600-1000 dollars,¹¹ get transportation out of state, find someone to

⁹ Liza Featherstone.

¹⁰ Caitlin Knowles Myers and Morgan Welch, "What is the relationship between abortion access and women's economic freedom?" *World Economic Forum*, May 5, 2022.

"In the most recent survey of abortion patients conducted by the Guttmacher Institute, 97% are adults, 49% are living below the poverty line, 59% already have children, and 55% are experiencing a disruptive life event such as losing a job, breaking up with a partner, or falling behind on rent."

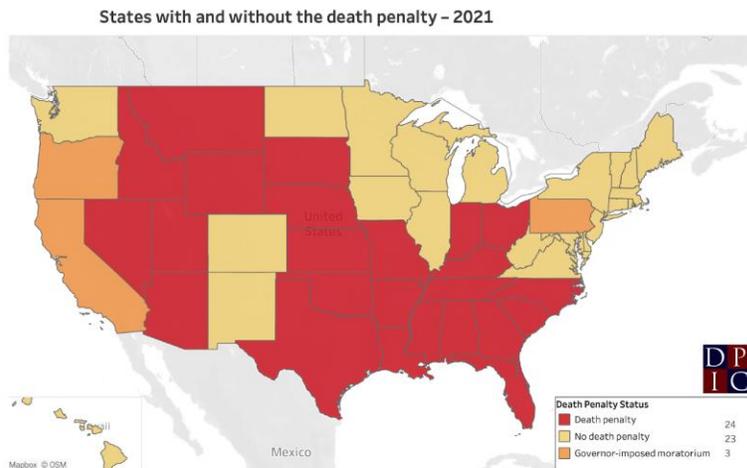
¹¹ Elizabeth Sepper and Kari White, "To understand life after Roe v. Wade, look to Texas," *The Hill* 05/05/22

watch the kids for a few days, and forgo the money they will lose at work while they are gone. Mothers who cannot get money together are forced to stay in the crisis that inspired the need for an abortion. They must stay with the abusive partner. Teens must reveal to their parents that they are pregnant, risking family rupture, especially if the pregnancy was caused by incest or rape. The problems which inspire the desire for an abortion don't go away when abortion is out of reach.

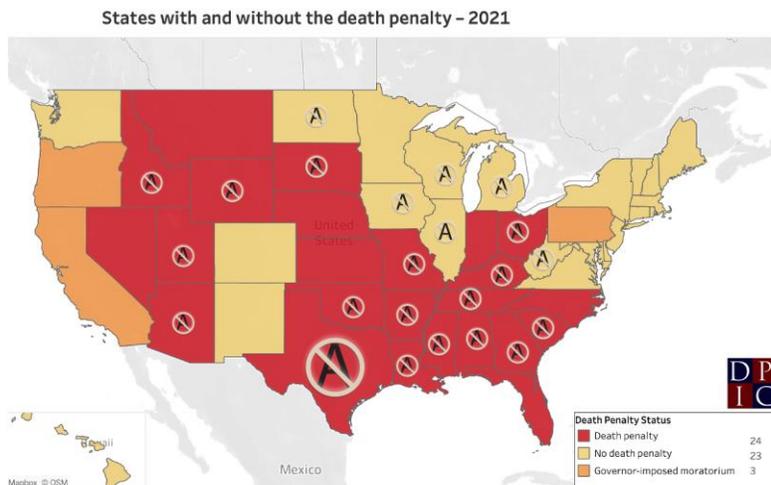
Whatever happens to abortion law in the United States, it appears clear that a two-tiered system will prevail. Wealthy women will be able to afford to travel and pay for abortions, whereas poorer women, who need abortion most often, will not. Abortion bans are part of a war against poor mothers, about fifty percent of whom are women of colour.¹²

All of this is hidden as long as we focus on the rights of the fetus. Proponents of abortion bans like to present the issue as a straightforward moral issue. Christianity says that killing is wrong, so states should ban abortion. How any individual interprets scripture is of course up to that person, that is the spiritual journey. However, states are not moral actors. God does not deal with states, God deals with human beings, and context is all important for God. It matters what else is going on in your life when you make any decision. God gets that. States who wish to ban abortion do not. They apply rules across the board, ignoring the situations of individual mothers. What's more, states do not act consistently. Here's a paradox about the abortion debate in the United States.

¹² Elizabeth Sepper and Kari White, "To understand life after Roe v. Wade, look to Texas," *The Hill* 05/05/22



This map of the United States shows in red all the states that currently practice capital punishment. ¹³They kill adult prisoners who have committed capital crimes.



Here is a map of the states who oppose abortion. ¹⁴ The majority of states that oppose abortion approve of capital punishment. If states were consistent, they would oppose capital punishment and abortion.

¹³ <https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/state-and-federal-info/state-by-state>

¹⁴ <https://www.cnn.com/2022/05/03/us/state-abortion-trigger-laws-roe-v-wade-overturned/index.html>

But they don't. States are composed of elected officials who want to get re-elected and receive funds from powerful lobbies. Most states where abortion is restricted or banned have populations who are in favour of abortion to some degree.¹⁵ State laws often do not reflect the opinions of their electorate, nor are they morally consistent. However, states do have the power to disregard the views and interests of mothers who want to make their own decisions about whether to have a child. They treat all mothers the same, in the name of the needs of the fetus, rather than the needs of real-life mothers. At a state level, this is economic oppression posing as morality.

On Mother's Day, let us remember that if we really respect mothers, they should be the ones telling us what they want for themselves and for the world. That was what inspired the first Mothers days. The idea that mothers should be able to speak for themselves, and that they have something important to say, which may be at odds with what the state of the time believes. Mothers may be ahead of the curve, and we should listen to them.

As church people, it can be tempting to think in terms of moral absolutes. But whenever we start down that path, let's remember today's psalm. In the second part of the psalm, the focus shifts, and the psalmist writes in the first person, no longer pretending to be a sheep. We hear about God protecting us as we walk in the valley of the shadow of death when life seems most uncertain and dangerous. We're told that God sets a table in the wilderness, where our cup overflows. This table is set in front of our enemies; God protects us and lets us eat.

Note that the psalm does not say that God will destroy those enemies for us. Instead, we have a picnic in their view. Real life is not about moral absolutes where we are right, and others are hunted down and eliminated for being wrong. We may yearn for the peace we once experienced in our mother's arms. But in reality, we live in a world where people disagree. Our faith offers us the strength to feel God's loving presence and support even when it feels like the world is against us. To know that our mother God is still with us.

When Anne Jarvis invented Mother's Day, she took an extra step, and invited some of those enemies over to share in the dinner. She got soldiers and their mothers from both sides of the Civil War together, year after year. Mother's Day

¹⁵ Elizabeth Sepper and Kari White, "To understand life after Roe v. Wade, look to Texas," *The Hill* 05/05/22

began with the understanding that mothers do not all agree, but that despite that, they should be heard. And in respecting their real life needs and wants, a better society can be built through understanding and compassion. Happy Mother's Day. Amen.