

What it Means to Be United Methodist: The Methodist History of Mother's Day
May 14, 2023 Tabor Heights & Montavilla United Methodist
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John 15:9-17

⁹As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. ¹²"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. ¹⁴You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. ¹⁶You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. ¹⁷I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

What does it mean to be United Methodist?

For the next few weeks we'll be talking about some of the basics of what it means to be a United Methodist:

What we Believe as United Methodists

Methodist Polity - Polity being the churchy word for governance style

And our Mission as Methodists

Today we're talking about The Methodist History of Mother's Day.

Happy Mother's Day...

I have some issues with Mother's Day. As a child whose mother died when I was 6, it was just awkward to not have a person to give the mother's day crafts and cards to, or to invite to the luncheon or tea with all the pink... everything.

As a mother myself, I feel like the idealized version of motherhood -- the 1950's June Cleaver-ish, romanticized, perfect hair, perfect kids, perfect, *fulfilling* life version of motherhood that sells Hallmark cards does harm to mothers. Mothering is messy and hard and the reality of mothering involves a lot less glowing skin and gentle advice and a lot more bags under the eyes and bodily fluids! And too many mothers are working ourselves into the ground trying to live up to these impossible standards of doing it all and doing it all by ourselves.

And as a woman, I kind of resent the way that mother's day sometimes gets extended to all women in a way that implies that all women *should* play a maternal role in somebody's life, as if somehow not being a mother makes you less fully a woman? Nobody ever asks men if they regret having a spectacular career instead of being a father.

So I figured, Mother's Day was just a Hallmark Holiday, that doesn't really matter, so I'll just skip it. Then I read a little article by Church historian, Professor Diana Butler Bass, PHD, about the Radical history of Mothers' Day. (https://www.huffingtonpost.com/diana-butler-bass/radical-history-of-mothers-day_b_3259326.html)

Mothers' Day was founded by Anna Jarvis, who never married and was not a mother herself. "In May 1907, Anna Jarvis, a member of a Methodist congregation in Grafton, West Virginia, passed out 500 white carnations in church to commemorate the life of her mother," Ann Reeves Jarvis, who in 1858, organized the local, poor women into "Mothers' Work Day Clubs" to work for clean water and sanitation, to improve the lives of women and children. Ann Jarvis also worked for universal access to medicine for the poor and was a pacifist who, during the civil war, served in camps on both sides offering medical care and directing camp sanitation for soldiers of the North and the South. (https://www.huffingtonpost.com/diana-butler-bass/radical-history-of-mothers-day_b_3259326.html)

For years, church women, like Methodist Ann Jarvis, had been agitating for a national Mothers' Day to be a day of political and social activism for promoting issues related to the lives of women and children, but it was the addition of the wearing of carnations -- a white one if your mother was deceased and a colored one if she was still alive, and Anna's celebration of her love for her mother at church, that caught on and spread into other churches through promotion by the YMCA and the World Sunday School Association, that resulted in Mother's Day being signed into law as a national holiday by President Woodrow Wilson in 1914, even though he was a Presbyterian instead of a Methodist.

Mothers' Day began as a day of political activism inspired by the life of a woman who took Jesus' teachings to love one another and care for the sick and the poor, seriously!

But what's really relevant for us as United Methodists is the way that Ann Reeves Jarvis embodied John Wesley's teachings to do all the good we can, even when we don't agree. You see, when West Virginia was divided by the civil war she believed that Jesus' command to love one another applied to Northerners and Southerners.

“At the beginning of the Civil War, Mrs. Jarvis called together four of her” Mothers’ Work Day “Clubs and asked them to make a pledge that friendship and goodwill would not be a victim of the conflict between the states.”

<http://legacyproject.org/guides/mdhistory.html>

Then “after the Civil War, Mrs. Jarvis worked as a peacemaker encouraging families to set aside differences created by the polarization of the war. In 1868, she organized a “Mothers Friendship Day” to bring together families that had been divided by the conflict.” <http://legacyproject.org/guides/mdhistory.html>

You see, the Civil War is as much a Methodist story as it is an American story.

In 1789, when Methodists in the newly formed United States were compelled to form their own denomination because of the break from the Church of England, they adopted into the first Book of Discipline a rule forbidding participation in slavery by Methodists.

Years later, in 1844, the General Conference voted to suspend Bishop James O. Andrew, who had recently acquired slaves through his marriage to a slave owning heiress, “so long as he could not, or would not, free his slaves.” Within a few days, Southern Methodists formed a plan of separation. In May 1845 White Southern Methodists created The Methodist Episcopal Church, South, while many Black and white Methodists continued as the Methodist Episcopal Church. The United Brethren and The Evangelical Association, who later became part of the United Methodist Church, were mostly located in northern states, so they did not schism.

<https://www.umc.org/en/content/division-in-america-and-expansion-overseas-1844-1860>

The Methodist Church was born alongside the United States so a lot of the social issues that affect the United States, have also affected the Methodists in America. The Methodist Church split just 6 years before the Civil War, over the exact same issue of whether Black people deserve civil rights. And this year some Methodists, about 8% so far and mostly in the South East, are choosing to leave the denomination over a very similar issue of whether LGBTQ+ people deserve civil rights... an issue that is also a hot topic in our country.

I think that especially now, in these divisive times, it’s important to remember how faithful Methodists like Ann Reeves Jarvis, and her daughter Anna, lived their faith. In a time when women didn’t even have the right to vote, they were leveraging the informal friendship networks of women to do the gospel work of peacemaking and caring for the sick and the poor. I don’t know how much Ann addressed how very wrong slavery was in her peacemaking between Northern and Southern Methodists. I

do know that Ann, as the daughter of a Methodist Minister and the wife of a merchant, didn't own slaves and that she lived and worked among poor and middle class white Southerners. Most Southerners and Southern Methodists couldn't afford to own slaves and were being talked into supporting slavery by rich plantation owners who didn't want to pay for labor. In other words, Ann Jarvis and the women she worked with weren't rich enough to be on Scarlett O'Hara's guest list, so they didn't really benefit from slavery.

I think this is an important point for us to recognize today as our country is going through another time of shifting values and deep divides.

Who benefits from excluding people from the church?

Who benefits from taking away civil rights from LGBTQ+ folks and people of color?

Not me. Not you.

What these stupid arguments about who Jesus would exclude actually do, is distract us, from the real work that God has called us to:

The work that Ann Jarvis and her Mother's Work Parties were doing:

- Peacemaking
- Advocating for those without political voice, like women and children
- Advocating for public safety
- Advocating for healthcare for all
- Helping those in need
- And advocating for civil rights for All people

And that kind of work, benefits the poor, which makes them a little less desperate and less willing to accept bad working conditions and insufficient wages.

So the rich and the powerful prefer it when the church is too busy arguing about who Jesus would exclude (which, by the way is nobody! - God loves everyone!)... the rich and the powerful prefer it when the church is too busy arguing about who Jesus would exclude to do the kind of work that Ann Jarvis did, because if we're too busy fighting each other, then we don't have enough time to fight for compassion and justice.

So this Mother's Day, I invite you to remember Methodist Leader, Ann Jarvis and the Mother's Work Parties she founded, and Anna Jarvis, who was utterly disgusted with the commercialization of Mother's Day.

Remember how they lived their faith like very methodical Methodists, and instead of getting mom flowers and a card, maybe send a card, or an email or a call to your elected representatives to advocate for civil rights, or healthcare or affordable housing.