

A SERMON PREACHED ON SUNDAY, MAY 13, 2018,

AT BETHANY BEACH CHRISTIAN CHURCH, BETHANY BEACH, DE

The temporary Sunday School teacher was struggling to open a combination lock on the supply cabinet. She had been told the combination, but couldn't quite remember it.

Finally she went to the pastor's study and asked for help. The pastor came into the room and began to turn the dial.

After the first two numbers he paused and stared blankly for a moment.

Finally he looked serenely heavenward and his lips moved silently.

Then he looked back at the lock, and quickly turned to the final number, and opened the lock.

The teacher was amazed. "I'm in awe at your faith, pastor," she said.

"It's really nothing," he answered. "The number is on a piece of tape on the ceiling."ⁱ

Ah, that prayer could be so easy. We see in the reading from this morning's *Gospel of John* just how complicated it can be in what is the longest prayer of the New Testament in which Jesus prays for and about his disciples and their understanding (or lack of) what is about to take place on and after the night he is betrayed. It comes in a strange place in this liturgical season of Easter, as have the gospel readings from the past few weeks, all of which attempt to elucidate Jesus' standing with God and his relationship, therefore, to his disciples and his responsibility for the world that he is about to leave. This makes the Last Supper more than a memorial meal; it provides for, and most apparently becomes the theological discourse on God's intention for the world and the part Jesus and we are to play in it. We have heard portions of all of it prior to this summary, and it is put in a prayer format so that we might feel motivated to move our hearts and our souls and our minds accordingly; that is to say, we are to be people of prayer, so now, here in this lesson, Jesus sets the tone and the format. Liturgically speaking, coming as it does after this past Thursday's celebration of The Feast of the Ascension, we are meant to see that unless Jesus goes to be with God, none of what needs to happen can do so. And next Sunday, when he arrives with The Spirit piggybacking on his vast experiences, his human work in this world is done and his full divine nature is born. As promised, he leaves a portion of himself to agitate or advocate (as they say in biblical terms) for an acknowledgement of his continued presence despite his personal human absence in the gift of the Holy Spirit who will continue the

work he has begun. He prays that we will open ourselves to this Spirit and together we will go about doing the work God has called us to. This means we must be ever vigilant that (a) we have a calling; (b) that it involves daily or constant prayer; (c) that we need to acknowledge the work of the Holy Spirit in ourselves and by extension, meet it in others; (d) that we need to be open to where it might lead us. I guess that is the bestest of questions for this morning, should we pause and ask ourselves, “where is the Spirit leading me,” or perhaps, “what role has the Spirit played in leading me to where I find myself today?”

Of course, this being Mother’s Day, one can’t help but think about the role our mothers took on so that we might be the person we are when we look into our hearts or the mirror, either one. I imagine most clergy in the United States abandoned the traditional exposition of the Scripture readings assigned today for the Sixth Sunday of Easter in favor of a walk down Memory Lane with our mothers. Wise move, I’d say. Mother’s Day is one of the top five Sundays for church attendance, with other big numbers in its favor. Those of you who know me know how much I like Top Ten and trivia lists, so here’s a bit to wake you up as well as give you some fodder for lunch conversation today with those who are mothers in your midst.

Mothers Day Statistics	Data
Total number of moms in the U.S.	85.4 million
Total amount of money spent on Mother’s Day Cards annually	\$671 million
Total amount of money that will be spent for mothers on Mother’s Day	\$20.7 billion
Total amount of money spent on flowers for their mothers on mother’s day	\$1.9 billion
The average amount American consumers will spend on mom for Mother’s Day	\$168.94
Percent of Mother’s Day gifts bought online	28.5 %
What Mom wants to receive for Mother’s Day	Percent

Something Homemade	36 %
Dinner	34.8 %
Greeting Card	31.5 %
Gift Cards	24.7 %
Flowers	22.5 %
Jewelry	11.2 %
Books	10.1 %
Spa	7.9 %
Clothing	5.6 %
Music	5.6 %
Movies	5.6 %
Travel	4.5 %
Electronics	3.4 %

So, if you met the bill in any of these categories, I think it's safe to say you'll have a good celebration today.ⁱⁱ Unless you're like me, who is neither a mother nor do I have any living mother or grandmothers. Folks like me need to content ourselves with thoughts of Mother's Days past, although it does not mean that we cannot remember, hopefully with fondness, the strong women who made it through World Wars and other universally catastrophic events so that we might be sitting here this morning. Let me

tell you a little bit about my mother, which by extension might remind you of yours or of who you are to others. She was born into what was then a mixed race family; my grandfather, one of ten children, was a Jewish police officer on the beat in the inner harbor area of Baltimore City, the only Jewish policeman on the force. He married my grandmother, who by any one's recollection was older than he (at least their marriage license said so). She was an orphan, and Episcopalian either by choice or because all the kids in her orphanage were; she worked in the nearby mills outside of the downtown area where they made men's raincoats and other outerwear. I suspect they might have met through my great-grandfather, who was a tailor, though as an Orthodox Jew he would never have countenanced their relationship. My mother, their only child, was born in 1923. She told me that she was aware of the Depression, but being that her father was on the force, there was never a shortage of food on the table, so she was lucky. She grew up to be what was then considered tall (she was 5'10" in sixth grade), so she stood out. Her name was Dorothy, presumably because that was her mother's name, as well as a variation of her paternal grandmother's name (Dora). (I say presumably because I found my grandparents' wedding license years ago in which my grandmother went by the name "Daisy.") She graduated from Southern High School in Baltimore City, which my father attended also. They had known each other since the third grade but did not date until after high school when my father went away to the University of Maryland for college. However, in high school, they were elected best all around girl and best all around boy. She did not go to college, which she often reminded us, usually with the admonition "now I didn't go to college like your father but that does not mean I don't know things. Try me. I might surprise you!" She chose instead to go into the work force as a bookkeeper and secretary at a local gas and oil company.

My father wrote to her weekly or more (we still have the letters) from school, though he often sent large portions of his missives in Gregg shorthand, so she'd have to get a girlfriend of hers to translate. I think my father was afraid someone might show his letters around, though I'm told he got a big kick out of the joy that folks thought he was part of some kind

of spy conspiracy network with secret messages going through the mail to his beautiful girlfriend. They married in 1946, a few days after Christmas. They had wanted to get married before Christmas, but in those days, one could not get married in Advent, as it was considered a penitential season. It was a big wedding which my mother paid for out of her own savings; my grandmother came, but stood at the back of the church. She was a shy woman with a gnarled hand due to some horrible accident when she was newly married, so she very rarely went out of the house. The reception was at the church hall, however; just tea, coffee, lemonade, and cookies.

My parents settled into their first apartment on Fort Avenue, so called because Fort McHenry, where the Star Spangled Banner flag had flown during the War of 1812, was across the street. My older sister and I were both born there, until at some point we moved to Gittings Avenue near the Baltimore County border. It was a tight knit neighborhood. A lot of the Baltimore Colts, Orioles and TV personalities were our neighbors. My mother was president of the Local Women's Club and later head of the Ladies' Improvement Association. While there she had two more children, and when I was aged 8, we moved to a large development of houses in Cockeysville, MD. It was then that my younger brother started to go the kindergarten, so my mother decided to go back to work. However, the lack of a college degree hurt her, and she ended up merely volunteering at the local library. Thirty years later she was Regional Clerical Supervisor for the entire Baltimore County Public Library System, and one of the most feared and revered women in her workplace. She was tough; there were no excuses, though she was known on occasion to give in to a second chance if she believed you were sincere in making good on it. She loved to give parties, especially her annual Christmas party, which everyone in the neighborhood, at church, and at work hope to be invited to. She had a large collection of Santa Clauses (several hundred, I think) and was even written up in one of the National Collector's magazines that extolled her borderline hoarding.

Dorothy (or "Dot" as my sister would call her, just to tease her) was fond of trying out new recipes, and was always sending me one or two to experiment with. She loved to travel, loved a martini at 5 (precisely at 5 or

if not her motto was “it must be 5 p.m. somewhere in the world.”) She was a smart dresser, which you can be when you’re 5’10” and wear a size 12 dress with 9AAA heels. She had hundreds, and I mean hundreds of pairs of shoes (since she wore such a rare size, she could find it in every color.) Dorothy loved jewelry, and wore rings on every finger, and many, many bracelets on her arms. My father used to say “when your mother dies, we’re not going to bury her - - we’re just going to melt her down.” She was a night person, a trait that I think she passed on to my younger sister and me. She loved to go out for dinner, and never missed a dinner party that she was invited to. She was not a gardener, but she loved flowers, and she was head of the altar guild at her church for 35 years. And then there was chocolate. There could never be too much chocolate, which made Mother’s Day a cinch.

In her late eighties, she began to develop dementia, and we were forced to put her in a home as she could no longer take care of herself. She liked the new home, though the dementia was moving very fast. She died nearly three months to the day from when we had her move out of her home. She was buried during Holy Week of 2009 and is interred in the cemetery at her home congregation in Cockeysville. She lived 86 good years.

People tell me I’m a lot like her in many ways, which I take as a compliment. She was intelligent, kind, had a great personal presence, and was always looking out for the underdog. My mom was generous, to a fault. She loved her children, even on days I’m not sure she should have.

I miss her and miss the long talks we would have in person. And how many times I’ve gone to pick up the phone to speak to her since only to remember she is elsewhere in some divine place where I hope to see and be with her again. I’m sure many of you feel the same way today or are just happy to be a mother and with your children, in person, if not in spirit. You know you are our heroes. Thanks for letting me tell you a bit about my mother, for in this way, through me and my siblings who remember her today, she comes alive for just a few minutes again.

Let me finish this morning with a poem that might remind you of your mother or being a mother or knowing a mother - - wherever life's courses have taken you. It's by the poet Lucy Maud Montgomery, and it's called, merely, *The Mother*:

Here I lean over you, small son, sleeping
Warm in my arms,
And I con to my heart all your dew-fresh charms,
As you lie close, close in my hungry hold...
Your hair like a miser's dream of gold,
And the white rose of your face far fairer,
Finer, and rarer
Than all the flowers in the young year's keeping;
Over lips half parted your low breath creeping
Is sweeter than violets in April grasses;
Though your eyes are fast shut I can see their blue,
Splendid and soft as starshine in heaven,
With all the joyance and wisdom given
From the many souls who have stanchly striven
Through the dead years to be strong and true.

Those fine little feet in my worn hands holden...
Where will they tread?
Valleys of shadow or heights dawn-red?
And those silken fingers, O, wee, fair son,
What valorous deeds shall by them be done
In the future that yet so distant is seeming
To my fond dreaming?
What words all so musical and golden
With starry truth and poesy olden

Shall those lips speak in the years on-coming?
O, child of mine, with waxen brow,
Surely your words of that dim to-morrow
Rapture and power and grace must borrow
From the poignant love and holy sorrow
Of the heart that shrines and cradles you now!

Some bitter day you will love another,

To her will bear
Love-gifts and woo her... then must I share
You and your tenderness! Now you are mine
From your feet to your hair so golden and fine,
And your crumpled finger-tips... mine completely,
Wholly and sweetly;
Mine with kisses deep to smother,
No one so near to you now as your mother!
Others may hear your words of beauty,
But your precious silence is mine alone;
Here in my arms I have enrolled you,
Away from the grasping world I fold you,
Flesh of my flesh and bone of my bone!ⁱⁱⁱ

Happy Sixth Sunday of Easter, Happy Sunday after the Ascension, Happy Mother's Day. Whichever you celebrate, may your day be filled with good memories, abundant laughter, and much love.

Amen.

(The Rev. Dr.) Rayner W. Hesse, Jr.
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i. http://jokes.christiansunite.com/Prayer/The_Combination.shtml

ii <https://www.statisticbrain.com/mothers-day-statistics/>

iii <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/the-mother-2/>