

**Mother's Day Blessings**  
**The Rev. Dr. Matthew Johnson**  
**May 8, 2016**

We must learn to bear the pleasures as we have born the pains. Must learn to bear the pleasures as we have born the pains.

You know, I don't know about how things used to be. I study history, and I remember some things, and I talk to people - but I don't know. It's easy to idealize the past, and forget that people are people, and maybe things weren't so great back then, either.

But what I do know is that there's a lot of complaining. There's a lot of griping and grievances and pain. There's a lot of resentment and anger.

Not just in our politics, but it is pretty obvious there, isn't it? - that anger and resentment is the currency of the day.

I pray for our country and those, most of all, who are the targets of that anger, over the next few months, and I resolve, as I hope you will with me, that we shall resist the anger and that we shall not be baited; that we shall stay grounded in love and hope.

But this anger, this resentment, isn't just in politics. Some anger and frustration, I should say, is well-sourced. Centuries of oppression, current practices of exclusion and violence. That's real. Don't hear me deny that.

But so much of the complaining, the judgement, isn't well-sourced at all; it's just this nastiness.

The comment section of every article you read.  
The vicious review. The road rage. The let's sit around  
and talk about what's wrong - what's wrong with the city,  
with the school, with that person over there, even  
sometimes "what's wrong with our church." Not here,  
though, you all would never do that.

Nothing is good enough. We critique. We judge. We  
compare. We put our pain out front like another form of  
armor.

And we internalize it. We feel a sense of shame - I'm not  
working out enough, I'm not rich enough, I'm not smart  
enough, I don't have the right toys, I don't have enough  
friends, and so on and so on and so on.

And you know where it can be worst of all? Parenting.  
We judge our parents: they let me down in this way or  
that way. And we judge ourselves as parents:  
we feel shame that we're not doing everything the way  
this article or that article says we are supposed to,  
even though the articles all contradict each other.

And I say parenting, and this is felt toward and by dads,  
but you know what I mean. Mothering.

We judge. We judge our own mothers. We judge other  
mothers. And, if a mother, chances are, we judge  
ourselves.

And most of the time, this judgment, especially self-  
judgment, doesn't produce concrete and achievable plans  
for modest improvement. No, it produces shame.  
A sense of despair and debasement.

Shame, which causes people to be defensive and reactive, and to repeat those behaviors that are least helpful.

Judgement of others, on the other hand, produces either smug-self-satisfaction; or it eats you away, as you nurture the grudges and the pain.

You must learn to bear the pleasures as you have born the pains.

I do not mean here to say that we should tolerate abuse or neglect, or that we should ignore injustice, or that we shouldn't set good boundaries. I don't mean to say any of those things, and I hold in my heart those of you whose experience is particularly painful. But that's not most of us. Most of us, there's great, and there's good, and there's meh, and there's a few screw-ups, maybe, but over all, it's just a human being doing their best.

So I am saying, count the blessings too.

Count the blessings; bear the pleasures. See the mother there at the table in the night, as the poet remembers, taking you into her lap, teaching you a poem drawing your eyes and your heart to the moon.

Give thanks for the blessings. For the way in which not just your own mother, but the generations have shaped you: we are our grandmothers' dreamings. We are the breath of our ancestors.

Count the blessings, and give thanks - and not just the blessings from your biological or primary mother.

That's part of the point - the point about how parenting without the village is hard — it is a reflection, indeed an amplification, of our individualistic culture.

This notion that we have one mother, one set of parents - it is wrong and inaccurate, and the sentiment that this is true makes parenting, especially mothering, so much harder! Impossible, really - it is impossible to parent, to mother, by yourself. You cannot do it. Don't try!

I'm talking about grandparents, grandmothers, yes, and aunts and cousins and other relatives, and dads, of course, them too, and neighbors, and other parents at school, and at church.

We give thanks for the blessings that this village has provided to us, and we also say, we need the village.

We need others to help us parent, to help us mother, to help us raise children and to live a life of meaning.

So we give thanks for blessings from all those who have mothered us, we bear the pleasure as well as the pain, and remember and honor those who have sown seeds of gladness into the world and into us. We count the blessings.

So I want you to do something. I won't want this to be abstract, I want this to be real. I want you to think of the people who have been mother-type figures to you. They might be of any gender or identity. They might be related to you and they might not.

They might be a generation older than you, or more, or less.

Someone who mothered you, who took care of you, who tried to love you, shelter you, and help you grow. Not someone perfect, slay that beast right now, but someone who was a mother of some kind or another to you.

Not the noun, the verb.

Think of some of the people who did this for you, or still do.

And in this space, gathered here, I invite you to say their names, speak their names, and listen, too, to all the names that come from other voices, into this holy space.

[names]

A cloud of witnesses gathered round. People who have loved us and cared for us and helped us be who we are.

They have blessed us. Those blessings are large and small. I think of blessings I received from those who have in some way mothered me: my mom who taught me to love art and nature, my grandmother who brought our family to Unitarianism, my stepmom who treated me like an adult when I wasn't one quite yet, my debate coach, Jim, who saw my strengths more clearly than most, my minister mentors, especially Barbara and Mary Ann and Kendyl and Peter,

who said, oh, yes, you can - and don't forget we care for you.

My neighbor who helps me figure out what's a flower and what's a weed,  
and takes in my kids in a pinch, or just for fun.  
And on and on.  
More than I can count.

Isn't this true for you too?  
When you start thinking of the blessings, the gifts you got,  
aren't there so many of them?

So do this, won't you?  
Think of that list of people you just named.  
And pick just a few of them,  
whoever they might be.  
And then think of one blessing they gave you.  
One thing they shared with you, or taught you with love,  
small or large or in-between,  
for which you wish to give thanks.  
What is that?

If you are willing, share - a word or a phrase -  
into this space, overlapping voices but still listening, too,  
these blessings.  
What were you given?

-blessings-

Do you hear all those things -  
from yourself and others?  
So many blessings,  
we must bear the pleasures  
if we bear the pain.

We are our mothers' dreaming, our grandmothers' dreaming,  
they have sowed in us seeds of gladness —  
seeds which have blossomed into us and our lives.  
And when I say "they" I mean it in the widest sense,  
all those who have loved us.

That, then, is another blessing -  
for those of us who are parents of some kind or another -  
to our own children, biological, adopted, foster,  
whatever their age,  
we who are mentors or teachers or aunties and uncles,  
that, even though we live in this individualistic culture,  
this culture that devalues the village,  
the village is still hanging on.  
We're not as alone as we think we are.  
Sometimes when we think about the people we can count  
on,  
we realize we should count on them more!  
This is true for parents and non-parents alike,  
for everyone.  
We think we're alone, and then we start reaching out,  
and we might discover, no, we have people.

Have you had this happen?  
You finally asked for help,  
and they said, "anytime! I wish you had asked before!"  
Giving thanks for those that help us in our mothering  
work  
is a way to disillusion ourselves of the fiction of  
individualism,  
the fiction that we do or we should go it alone.

So think of those who are your co-parents, your village of  
mothers,

in raising and loving the children, or adults, for who you have some responsibility.

Maybe it is right now,  
or maybe it was a long time ago, when your children were young,  
think of those who were your village, your team of mothers and parents and sowers of seeds.  
And let's bring their names into this space.

[names]

A cloud of witnesses.

And, a release.

Don't you feel it?

You are not in this alone.

You don't have to be perfect.

You don't have to do it by yourself.

You have to love, and invite others to love too,  
and try, and get up again after you fall,  
and give thanks for blessings,  
but mothering isn't a solo sport - thank god.

there is a justice question here, of course -  
because this ideology of individual perfection,  
this ideology that produces shame and paralysis,  
isn't just reflected in our attitudes and our advertising industry,  
it's also reflected in the way we structure society -  
in the absence of parental leave and flexible work hours,  
in the missing sidewalks and the low minimum wage,  
in the long hours of homework instead of play,  
in the detention centers, drug wars, and immigration raids that separate families,  
and break neighborhoods,  
in sprawl and redlining and food deserts.

So, hold those blessings in your heart, in your mind,  
hold the names of all those who have blessed you  
and have helped you bless others,  
and let us resolve to bring more blessings to one another

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whatever the source of our blessings, what can we do to  
bless the world,  
and to structure a society that restores the capacity and  
centrality  
of the village of mothers and relatives and neighbors,  
the network of love and web of care  
that smooths the edges and gives us hope.

Hold those blessings in your heart, in your mind.  
Treasure the gifts you have been given and have given  
yourself,  
and in the spirit of "good enough", in the spirit of  
abundance and community,  
give thanks.

One more word about blessing before I finish this  
morning.

It is a blessing to serve as your minister.

As I said last week, and have before, I really do love you  
people.

Just as you are, in your hope and trouble, in your love  
and struggle,

you can be wise, hilarious, and more compassionate than  
anyone would believe.

I'm going to miss you for the next three months -  
though I'll see some of you at some of the rites of  
passage I'll still do,  
or around town -

but my sabbatical starts on Thursday.

I'll be back for Homecoming on August 29th.

This is a blessing, too, this time - for me, yes, a time to  
renew my stores of inspiration,  
and ideas, to study and learn and step away from the  
routine and see the big picture.  
I'll bring back more than pictures and mementos, I hope  
to bring back  
fresh perspectives on what it means to be religious and  
do church.  
But it should be a blessing time for you, too -  
a time for you to try new things, to fill in the spaces, to  
step forward  
and use fresh eyes.  
Because church takes a village too,  
it is not an individualistic enterprise,  
it is not that I provide a service for you, the paying  
customer,  
it is that we are a covenanted community together,  
and we all have a ministry.  
So step up and step forward, and stretch out,  
and depend on each other,  
and let the blessings of fellowship and love be with you -  
and I'll see you again before you know it.  
And I really do love you all.