

A SOFTER WAY

--The month of May inevitably brings with it Mother's Day.

As a preacher, frankly, I've always found Mother's Day to be a bit of a challenge, for it's no easy thing year after year to come up with something novel and engaging--to say something about mothers that hasn't been heard a hundred times before over the years, or that doesn't sound so sickening sweet that it is enough to push the hearer in the direction of a good case of diabetes.

That being confessed, there is probably no mother or no woman anywhere who ever gets tired of hearing how uniquely wonderful she is, so let's get that declared right up front, shall we?

Mothers, grandmothers, you are some of the most fabulous people God ever put on the surface of the earth. Honestly. Most surely, the greatest ones among us, and in your own personal best moments, you give form and voice and personality to God, and at your knee all of us, women and men alike, have learned some of life's most important lessons.

Women in general, whether you have ever been or will ever be a mother or a grandmother, it is said that you are part of the "weaker" sex, yet you demonstrate with all that you are compelled to endure over the course of your days that you are anything but lesser or inferior to any male around you. I have heard it said that if men had the babies, there would never be a family larger than one child. While that's probably a saying created by some woman, I can admit that, having had the displeasure some years ago of giving birth to a kidney stone, I for one certainly wouldn't go back for more of that, if such experience is anywhere close to giving birth to a human being of whatever size or weight.

Young girls of all ages, you may not recognize it now, and there will be those in the future who will try to disabuse you of the notion, but, by virtue of your gender, you are a natural part of a most amazing sisterhood. It is one that quite literally dates back farther than anyone can remember, to a time before all the masculine gods strutted onto center stage and when the Holy wore the face of the Goddess. Long, long before Divinity was rigidly and jealously a "He," it was quietly and steadfastly a "She," a fact now largely lost as a part of history--which is to say, not surprisingly, lost to "his story."

--All that said or, if you have heard parts of it before on former Mother's Days, re-said, we are now at liberty to launch into our further reflections for the morning--which puzzlingly begin with a series of rather huffy-sounding paragraphs in Matthew's gospel account that are attributed to Jesus. It is to be admitted that these are not at all what one might expect to be read on the tender occasion of a Mother's Day.

That being so, let us try to make the best of it. We might begin with the observation that the eleven verses that were read aloud for us are a sampling of a much longer section of almost thirty verses in this fifth chapter of Matthew. Over and over again here, there is the repetition of a two-part formula of sorts: (1) "You have heard that it was said" [or "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times"]--whereupon Jesus cites some belief or practice that has been held for generations, and (2) "But I say to you"--with Jesus' proceeding then to contradict that belief or practice.

It should be noted parenthetically that there is a bit of contrivance here on the part of the evangelist. You see, for Matthew, Jesus is the new Moses. Since the original Moses receives the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, in this gospel narrative, Jesus, as the second, as the new and improved Moses, in his so-called "Sermon in the Mount," qualifies the longstanding commandments from antiquity by adding his own twists to them and

criticisms of them.

There are plenty of surprises along the way here. Instead of retaliation--of the just punishment of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth--Jesus counsels non-resistance. Instead of meeting violence with violence, Jesus speaks of turning another cheek, until we run out of cheeks. Instead of pushing back against unfair demands, Jesus encourages giving cloak as well as coat, and walking a second mile when forced already to have walked one. Instead of loving only neighbors and hating adversaries, Jesus suggests praying for all, not simply asking for attention and favor towards one's beloved "brothers and sisters," but also, unthinkable, towards one's persecutor, one's "enemies," "the unrighteous" and "the evil."

Quite clearly, Jesus' way is a very new and a very different way. Instead of swift and harsh judgment, there is to be mercy. Instead of self-obsessed competition, there is to be compassion. Instead of domination, there is to be submission. Instead of acquisitiveness, there is to be selfless sharing.

In short, Jesus' very new and different way, while certainly not an easier way, has all the appearances of being a softer way. It is a way that is aimed at draining the emotional and spiritual poisons from the air, and at neutralizing the existing negatives alienating people from one another--both which merely contribute to the collective suffering in the world.

It could in fact be said that Jesus' very new and different way is one which distances itself from the way of the fathers and which moves decidedly in the direction of the way of the mothers.

Without question, this new way violates every strand of established conviction that the world is a nasty, dog-eat-dog sort of place which demands the exercise of power and pay-back and counter-punch and brutal force. Yeah, that seems to have worked pretty well in Syria and now in Venezuela--suggesting that all sense of such thinking is pure nonsense.

--Clearly, Jesus' way is a softer way. And we'd have to concede that it is just the sort of "feminine" counsel that could conceivably help, heal, and save a world. Whether or not it is oblique evidence of the fact that some woman must have had Jesus' ear, that he should be promoting such things so contrary to the old and accepted ways of venerable forefathers, what better occasion than a Mother's Day to reiterate them, to remind ourselves of them, to set them before us meaningfully as the higher way forward?

There is no doubt about it: If the world is to have a brighter and better future day, sooner or later, it will have to go this softer way.

But, in her heart of hearts, every woman already knows that, right?