

1 - Sermon, May 9, 1999

Text: Acts 17:22-31, Mark 1:39-45

Title: "Can You Touch God?"

Central Idea: We touch God not in what we make, but in the love we have for God's creatures.

1. We want to touch God - that's what idolatry is
2. But we are made by God. It is in what God has made, not what we have made that we find fulfillment.
3. We praise mothers as a way of praising God.

It's a wonderful story. A foreigner named Paul, from a little backward country at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea comes to the great cultural center of Athens - the big university town - and he goes to the Areopagus, where the newest fad ideas are being exchanged and is invited to speak.

He takes them by surprise. Here I quote Eugene Peterson's translation of the New Testament:

So Paul took his stand in the open space at the Areopagus and laid it out for them. "It is plain to see that you Athenians take your religion seriously. When I arrived here the other day, I was fascinated with all the shrines I came across. And then I found one inscribed, TO THE GOD NOBODY KNOWS. I'm here to introduce you to this God so you can worship intelligently, know who you're dealing with.

"The God who made the world and everything in it, this Master of sky and land, doesn't live in custom-made shrines or need the human race to run errands for him. Starting from scratch, he made the entire human race and made the earth hospitable, with plenty of time and space for living so we could seek after God, and not just grope around in the dark but actually find him. He doesn't play hide-and-seek with us. He's no remote; he's near. We live and move in him, can't get away from him. One of your poets said it well: 'We're the God-created.' Well, if we are the God-created, it doesn't make a lot of sense to think we could hire a sculptor to chisel a god out of stone for us, does it?

"God overlooks it as long as you don't know any better -- but that time is past. The unknown is now known, and he's calling for a radical life-change. He has set a day when the entire human race will be judged and everything set right. And he has already appointed the judge, confirming him before everyone by raising him from the dead."

2 - Sermon, May 9, 1999

Paul is saying, in essence, "You talk of high ideas, but you still want a god you can touch, manipulate, make in your own image. You're off the mark. God's love is much bigger than you. God cannot be manipulated or have an image made of gold or silver; God's too big for that. In fact, he sent Jesus to tell us that we have to live our lives right."

Paul was working on changing minds as well as hearts. He wanted to get people to see God not in what *they'd* made, but in what *God* has made.

Sometimes we *can* slide into worshiping what we've made, rather than what God has made. Sometimes we value our worth by what we make: our salary, our handiwork, our projects at home, our collections, and so on.

But nothing that we can make is worth devoting our lives to. It is what God has made -- other people and God's created world -- that are really worth devoting our lives to.

Maybe that's part of the point of Mother's Day. If there is anything or anyone that God has created that is worth honoring, it is our mothers. If we are looking for a God we can touch, perhaps we should think of the love that is given through the tender touch of good mothers. A mother's love can remind us of God's love.

Today we praise God for mothers, whom God created. Mothers are a channel for the life that God gives.

But let me tell you a little bit of the history of Mother's Day. Mother's day did not start honoring mothers as a way of honoring childbearing. Anna Jarvis is the woman credited with founding the modern observance of Mother's Day. Her Methodist Church in Grafton, West Virginia, is called "the Mother's Day Church" because Anna Jarvis was active there and her home in Grafton is a national landmark. Anna Jarvis was inspired by her mother, Anna Reeves Jarvis who organized "Mothers' Work Day Clubs" in the 1850s in the area. The clubs provided medicines for the poor, inspected milk for children, provided nursing care for the sick, and ran shelters for children with tuberculosis.

When the Civil War broke out she called together her clubs and asked them to make a pledge that friendship and good will would not be a casualty of the war. Throughout the war, the women nursed soldiers from both sides and saved many lives.

3 - Sermon, May 9, 1999

Anna Reeves Jarvis became a genuine peace maker after the war, organizing "Mothers' Friendship Days" to bring together families from North and South which had been torn asunder by the war.

Anna Jarvis, the daughter, was born in 1850 (date?) and was an impressionable child and teenager when her mother was at the peak of her courageous work. So in 1907, two years after her mother's death, she organized the first "mothers' day" in Grafton, West Virginia, so that her mother's work of *peace and mission* would not be forgotten.

Jarvis wanted to commemorate the day as one in which love in action was remembered. But before long she deemed her efforts to be trivialized by the commercialization of the newly-formed holiday. "She filed a lawsuit to stop a 1923 Mother's Day festival and was even arrested for disturbing the peace at a war mothers' convention where women sold white carnations -- Jarvis' symbol for mothers -- to raise money. "This is not what I intended," Jarvis said. "I wanted it to be a day of sentiment, not profit!"

When she died in 1948 (date?), at age 84 (is this correct?), Anna Jarvis had become a woman of great ironies. Never a mother herself, her maternal fortune dissipated by her efforts to stop the commercialization of the holiday she had founded, Jarvis told a reporter shortly before her death that she was sorry she had ever started Mother's Day. She spoke these words in a nursing home where every Mother's Day her room had been filled with cards from all over the world."

Mother's Day had started out as a celebration of peace and mission done by mothers, to heal the wounds of the American Civil War. It became something else.

Mother's Day started out as a celebration of what God had done -- made peace and healing through the love of mothers. It wound up being taken over by the culture and used as a way to make money.

If the Apostle Paul were to come here today, and stand before you, he'd say to us, "I see you are very devoted to your mothers. You even have a day for them. But do you honor your mothers above your work, your hobbies, your pet interests? They are God's creation -- they are much more important than *your* creations.

4 - Sermon, May 9, 1999

And the Apostle Paul might say to us, you honor your mothers with gifts and phone calls and flowers, but do you honor them by doing work of love and peace?

What would your mother really want from you -- candy and flowers? Or peace and love in your family, hope and faith in each person? It's in doing these things that you touch God.

And what does Jesus say to our celebration of Mothers Day? The one who touched a man with leprosy and cleansed him of his sickness wants us to touch each other with love and do the work of healing. I'm sure that Jesus loves the honoring of our fathers and mothers, because that's a commandment.

Just as Jesus touched and healed the man with leprosy, so we are called to touch the people and things that God has created — touch them with respect and honor. Let's honor our mothers by the work of our hands; the work of our hearts and minds.

Amen.

"So he travelled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons. A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, "If you are willing, you can make me clean." Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured. Jesus sent him away at once with a strong warning: "See that you don't tell this to anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them." Instead he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news. As a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places. Yet the people still came to him from everywhere." Mark 1:39-45, NIV.

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth,

5 - Sermon, May 9, 1999

and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him--though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we too are his offspring.' Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."
(Acts 17:22-31, NRSV).

Anna Jarvis wanted Mother's Day to be a day of sentiment. But by sentiment she did not mean sentimental. She meant that she wanted mother's day to be a day of feeling for the needs of the world, for peace and love, for changing our hearts, for letting the example of our mothers guide us to be caring people.

Love has to be obedience in action. I believe Anna Jarvis' mother, Anna Reeves Jarvis, knew that. Her love was a love in action. A love that reached out to the needy. A love that brought peace to a hurting nation. A love that does more than tells of the love of God and the love of neighbor but one that also shows how such love can transform the world.

We know how to express our love of God and love of neighbor. God wants us to have more than a good feeling about him. He wants us to be obedient to his commandments by putting our love in action.

Another one of the earliest promoters of the idea of Mother's Day was Julia Ward Howe, author of the Battle Hymn of the Republic. Julia Ward Howe was a militant abolitionist, and her "Battle Hymn" inspired the Union Army in the Civil War.

When the Civil War was over, Julia Ward Howe focused her attention on two other causes: voting rights for women, and world peace. In 1870 war broke out between France and Prussia. The war in Europe did not make sense to her and she wrote, "Why do not the mothers of mankind interfere in these matters to prevent the waste of that human life of which they alone know and bear the cost?". . . "Arise Christian women of this day. As men have often forsaken the plough and the anvil at the summons of war, let women on this day leave the duties of hearth and home to set out in the work of peace."

6 - Sermon, May 9, 1999

Here's a definition of peace:

Focusing on the things God made, instead of the things humans make.

It's a simple definition, that babies and beauty mean more to us than budgets or bombs!

Julia Ward Howe began organizing what she called "Mothers' Peace Day" festivals which were celebrated annually on June 2. Her conviction was that though the world may be divided by war and conflict, the experience of childbirth could bind the mothers of the world together into one family.

So the central concerns of those who established Mother's Day were civil liberties, international peace, overcoming poverty and ministering to the poor and sick. From the beginning this was a day not simply to remember one's own mother, but to find lessons for life in the experience and work of such mothers as Anna Reeves Jarvis and Julia Ward Howe.

These women were not commemorating simply that they had borne children, but what they had learned from the pain and suffering of childbirth about the essential meaning of life for us all.