

## Mom and Memory

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The reason I wanted us to play the name-association game with our Communion runner this morning is because I thought Mother's Day would be a good occasion for us to remind ourselves who who we are. Not who we once were, but we now are, because the women whose names were written on this piece of cloth are still part of us – not in some sort of mystical, abstract, theoretical “communion of saints” sort of way, but in the living, breathing, decision-making people who are sitting here this morning.

Of course, in the materialistic age in which you and I live, we recognize the genetic material we embody from our mothers. Barb Holtz preserves some of that material from Ruth Post, as does Nancy Jacquet. It's relatively easy to look at Barb and Nancy and see traces of both Ruth and Don, just as we can look at Yurick Jakse and still see Ed.

But genes have never told the real story of our lives, which lies much deeper than our physical resemblance to another human being. Genes begin the process of a personal narrative, but they never end it. And in the most important ways, they don't even shape it.

The fact that I have blue eyes is basic genetics. I must have inherited them from my mother, because my father, who was swarthy enough to believe himself to be part Native American, did not have blue eyes.

But what I inherited from my mother will not determine what my blue eyes see, or where I will choose to direct my gaze, or how I will describe to others what I've seen, or what I will choose to do in response to what I've chosen to look at.

Something far more important than genes is at work in those actions – we call that something free will – and will is a combination of memory and hope. And memory and hope, far more than eye color or how our body fat is distributed, will determine the stories our lives will tell. Mom and memory are far more important than mom and genes, and that's why we called to memory things associated with the names on our Communion runner. We're bringing again into our midst some of the people who make us us, and only some of that make-up is physically genetic; the rest is spiritual.

And that's why the name Hettie pearl Foster appears on our Mothers of the Church Communion runner. She never set foot in this church building, and not a drop of her blood flows through the veins of anyone who has.

But Pearl Foster, as she was known to her contemporaries, shaped both my memory and my hope in profound ways when I was a child, and even more so now that I'm a grown-up.

Pearl was my Granny, although we weren't biologically related. Ours was a relationship that anthropologists call “fictive kinship.” We were related not by blood, but by God's Holy Spirit, and she rarely went to church. She and I were fictive kin in the way that people become our honorary grandparents, aunties, uncles, and cousins – because they love us and we come to love them in return, and where love is, God is. Fictive kin become part of our lives, and we become part of theirs not because we have to but rather because we want to. And this wanting to be part of someone's life does not necessarily

have to do with mutual attraction; in the best and most enduring relationships, it has to do with non-obligatory care.

That's the kind of care we see in that tiny story of fictive kinship embedded in the tragic story of Jesus's crucifixion that I read as our gospel lesson. The disciple whom Jesus loved was under no obligation to adopt Jesus's mother. Mary's biological relatives – her so-called real kin – were expected then, as we would expect them now, to care for her in the absence of male support.

But Jesus always looked at biological relationships – the ones we take most seriously – a bit squint-eyed, recognizing them both for what they are and what they are not. He did not pretend that the world is made up of happy families – he'd read his Bible, after all, and you're hard-pressed to find many happy families in its pages – and because of his relationship to and with God, he redefined the family to bring it more closely into conformity with the way things are done in God's realm.

“Who are my mother and brothers?” he asked, when his family showed up thinking he'd lost his marbles. “Here are my mother and brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother” (Mark 3:33-35). Jesus redefined family, and he showed us from the cross how that redefinition plays itself out in the real world.

And I know first-hand what Jesus's redefinition of family looks like – what non-obligatory care looks like – because it is that kind of care that made Granny and me kin.

When I was orphaned at eight years old, and went to live with my half-brother and sister-in-law in southern Indiana, Granny was under no obligation to treat me as she treated her other thirteen grandchildren. She could have accepted me grudgingly as an awkward addition to an already demanding cohort of children, and not let me forget that I was, biologically speaking, someone else's grandchild. And some folks in that little town in southern Indiana, although not many, never let me forget that I was an imposition.

But not Granny. With her I was just one of the grandkids, as welcome at her table and in the bed where we grandkids spent the night as any of her other children's children. She had the option of preserving a distinction based on biology that she chose to ignore, and that decision made all the difference in the path that was being carved out for my life.

In the first place, it gave me acceptance and love that I did not deserve and to which I could lay no claim, which I knew even when I was eight. But in the second, and perhaps more important place, Granny provided the role model for me and my adoptive family: if Pearl said that I belonged, who were you to say otherwise?

Mothers and grandmothers and every woman here today whose ever had a home or made a home – that's the power you have. You may not be able to control whether your children or grandchildren make the decisions you would have them make, but what you can do is model the kinds of decisions that you would want anyone's child to make. And in modeling that behavior, you become anyone's mother or grandmother. You become a mother of the church.

That's what my Granny-who-wasn't-my-granny showed me, and it's what all the women whose names are on that runner showed us, and that's why we wrote their names in permanent ink. There's not a name on that cloth that's there because the woman attached to it had biological children. Her name is there because she touched our lives with the grace of God and made them better.

She might or might not have had biological children, but mothering, as every mother knows, is very different from reproducing.

That's one of the several points made in the story from Genesis that was our first lesson. Sarah does not come off looking very good in this story, and if you read the other version of the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael in chapter 16, she looks even worse. We're

all taught the story of childless Abraham and barren Sarah from the time we're little, and we're taught that they desperately wanted a son – not a daughter, but a son – and that God answered their prayers.

But as St. Teresa of Avila shrewdly pointed out, more tears are shed over answered prayers than unanswered ones, and the tears in Abraham and Sarah's family began to flow after their boys were born. And the wounds that our spiritual father and mother suffered were largely self-inflicted. Sarah had a hundred ways to respond to whatever it was that upset her in the interaction between Ishmael and Isaac, but the path she chose was mean and low and cruel. It is, perhaps, no accident that we hear nothing more about Sarah in the story of her family except the notice of death and burial. And nowhere in that famous story of childlessness do we hear of Sarah treating her longed-for son as any mother would be expected to do. The Bible, which is often far more honest about the human condition than we are, knows the difference between reproducing and mothering.

And the people we honor today are the mothers in and of this church – the women whose lives, rather than their offspring, witness to their faith. They are the mothers we hold in our collective memory, and they are the moms whose lives give us hope.

And so to all of the mothers of Faith Church, who have made this congregation a place of welcome, acceptance, peace, and love, I wish you a happy and blessed Mother's Day.