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## *Mother's Day is for Friends*

**A sermon by Dean Sam Candler**  
**Mother's Day – Easter 4 – Year C**

This past Wednesday, I was in Charleston, South Carolina, for the annual meeting of a Clergy Conference group I belong to. We were hosted, gloriously, by one of the great Episcopal churches in our country, Grace Church, now Grace Church Cathedral, in Charleston. How that church has come to be the cathedral is another story, a long one, which is worth telling sometime, but not today.

We worshipped while we were there, as is fitting, on Wednesday evening, when there was quite a sizeable congregation. On that evening, we observed the Feast of Saint Julian of Norwich. Unless we follow the daily lectionary in our daily prayers, most of us do not have occasion to remember Lady Julian. But today, this Sunday, I do want to mention her. It is a happy circumstance that her feast day, Dame Julian of Norwich, May 8, falls so closely each year to our observation of Mother's Day.

Mother's Day! Some of you may know that our observance of "Mother's Day" derives from the inspiration of Julia Ward Howe, who was really one of the early feminists of the nineteenth century. It was she who wrote "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" during the Civil War.

After the Civil War, she was devastated by the ruin and destruction of her country, both north and south. So she proposed that women, women in particular, ought to gather together to proclaim a new peace, a peace without war and violence.

She was on to something. Listen to a portion of her "Mother's Day Proclamation," written in 1870:

*Arise then...women of this day!*  
*Arise, all women who have hearts!*  
*Whether your baptism be of water or of tears!*

*Say firmly:*  
*"We will not have questions answered by irrelevant agencies,*  
*Our husbands will not come to us, reeking with carnage,*  
*For caresses and applause.*  
*Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn*  
*All that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy and patience.*

*...As men have often forsaken the plough and the anvil*  
*At the summons of war,*  
*Let women now leave all that may be left of home*  
*For a great and earnest day of counsel.*

*...Let them solemnly take counsel with each other as to the means*  
*Whereby the great human family can live in peace...*  
*Each bearing after his own time the sacred impress, not of Caesar,*

*But of God –*

*In the name of womanhood and humanity, I earnestly ask  
That a general congress of women without limit of nationality,  
May be appointed and held at someplace deemed most convenient  
And the earliest period consistent with its objects,  
To promote the alliance of the different nationalities,  
The amicable settlement of international questions,  
The great and general interests of peace.*

Those words are stirring! As far as I know, no such women's congress, in the name of international peace, ever assembled. But that vision is still among us. And it is being made real in families, and in cities, all over the world.

And from those words, we have, at least, set aside a day to honor all mothers: grandmothers, godmothers, stepmothers, great-grandmothers. We give thanks to you today, for your love, your care, your tenderness and your toughness, your grace and your discipline, your love that cares for the long term. The ministry of motherhood, the identity of motherhood, is part of the Christian life.

The feast day we celebrated this past week, that of Julian of Norwich, also teaches us about motherhood. She was a mystic, Julian was, of fourteenth century England. She ended up living and counseling from a small room, a cell, they called it, attached to the local church. But from her prayer and devotion emerged beautiful words of comfort, including the gentle line: "All shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well." Lady Julian, too, spoke the deep and gentle words of a caring mother.

Julian of Norwich, however, is also known for her provocative vision of God as Mother. In her mystic sight, Julian realized that "God is as really our Mother as he is our Father" (*Revelations of Divine Love*, chapter 59). Indeed, Julian would go on to say that, Jesus, too, is our Mother. She said, "Jesus Christ who sets good against evil is our real Mother. We owe our being to him—and this is the essence of motherhood." And later: "So Jesus is our true Mother by nature at our first creation, and he is our true Mother in grace by taking on our created nature" (*Revelations of Divine Love*, Chapter 59). What is amazing that these were not the words of a new age feminist; they were the words of a fourteenth century woman of prayer! Hey! These are the same words which will be sung by our choir in a few minutes, during the Offertory Anthem! The text of their music was written by Julian of Norwich.

Think of what our gospel for today might say, if we truly allowed ourselves that kind of imagination, the imagination to consider that God is our Mother. Jesus might have said, not, "The Father and I are one" (John 10:30), but "The Mother and I are one."

Yes, on this Mothers' Day, of course, we give thanks for all the various mothers in our lives: our mothers, our grandmothers, our godmothers, our step-mothers, our stand-in mothers, our foster mothers, our living mothers, and our deceased mothers, our graceful mothers, and our even our disgraceful mothers. We call them lots of things, usually good things! And we give thanks for mothers.

A woman once told me this about her mother: "She used to be my mother but now she's my friend." Maybe we have all heard sons and daughters alike call their mother their best friend. The same goes for fathers, too. One of the most delightful things a child ever calls a mother is "friend."

It may be the best thing we can ever call our mother: "Friend." But it comes in a mature stage, a stage that occurs after the strained years of childhood and adolescence, when both children and parents are learning how to grow up. After that maturity, an amazing glow settles on mother and daughter, and on mother and son. It is the glow of friendship, a glow seasoned with time and love. Maybe it is a time when mother and child become one again. "The Mother and I are one."

"I used to call her 'mother,' but now I call her friend." It is one of the most important things we can say. It means, somehow, that motherhood has become complete. It may be that the ultimate purpose of motherhood is to be a friend. And it may be that the ultimate purpose of fatherhood is to be a friend.

It is surely true that the purpose of being God is to be friend. Yes, the purpose of God is to be our friend. That is why Jesus

told his disciples, near his death, that he no longer called them servants; he called them friends. And he prayed that they might be one, just as he and the father, or mother, are one.

God wants to be one with us. God wants to be friend to us. I don't mean "friend" in a sloppy way. And I certainly don't mean friend in the virtual "Facebook" kind of way. Becoming a friend to someone is much more than a click on a computer keyboard.

No, being a true friend to someone takes time. A friend is someone with whom we have lived for a while, someone with whom we have grown together.

Saint Julian called God her mother. But Saint Aelred of Rievaulx, in the twelfth century, AD, wrote one of the Christian masterpieces on friendship. It was titled, "On Spiritual Friendship;" and he wrote that true friendship is a virtue, so great a virtue, in fact, that it leads to unity with God. Friendship, true friendship, is a way of knowing God.

Finally, at one point, Saint Aelred, says quite simply, "God is friendship." Not just "God is Love," which we say and sing all the time; but "God is friendship."

God is friendship. When we cultivate friendships, when we risk embarrassment and betrayal and honesty in order to make friends, when we dare to call someone our friend, when we dare to call our mother or father our friend, we are very close to loving as God loves. We are very close to God.

Today, we call our mother "friend." Mother's Day is for friends. So is Father's Day! We are friends. That friendship is the very love of God.

AMEN.

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