

Post-Mother's Day murmurings

By [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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Sue came into the church office in order to help with some paperwork and plans for Sunday morning worship. “What are we doing for Mother’s Day?” she asked.

I paused. I had always benignly neglected Mother’s Day at our church. I thought of it as a Hallmark holiday, and not something that should fit on a liturgical calendar. I was taught in seminary that we should never mention it. Plus, there were personal reasons as well.

I had memories of my Baptist upbringing, where they would give a hydrangea to the oldest mother and the youngest mother in the congregation in an elaborate ceremony. There seemed to be an underlying message in the ritual: A woman is made for motherhood... and not much else.

I had memories of those excruciating years when I could not have a child, because we were always moving for education or jobs and we couldn’t afford bringing a baby into our insecure world. Mother’s Day was a reminder of what I couldn’t be.

I had memories of my miscarriage. Mother's Day became a time of grief and mourning.

I explained all of this to Sue, while depersonalizing the reasons, "Well, sometimes churches celebrate motherhood so much, that it gives the message that giving birth is the only thing that women can do. Some people cannot become mothers, and I don't want to highlight that pain. And it's not actually a Holy Day."

Her face fell.

I knew her story. She had an excellent education and career—but that changed when she had children. She felt like she was living two lives, needing to give 100% to her career and 100% her children. Finally, she made a choice. She quit her high-power job in order to stay home with her kids.

Although I was in the midst of juggling motherhood and pastoring, I respected her decision. It was the right one for her. But she battled many of the things that mothers do in our culture—depression from the isolation, anxiety from domestic perfectionism, and an unfair sense of failure because she hadn't been able to do it all.

"I was just hoping for something at church. You know, mothers don't get much appreciation in our culture. When I was at my job, we had titles, honors and constant recognition for our achievements. You don't get an award for getting up and breastfeeding your child in the middle of the night, every night. I guess I just hoped for a prayer of thanks or something."

I've always done something for Mother's Day after that.

We don't have a hydrangea ritual. We always acknowledge that pain that many feel along with the celebration. And we do have a prayer, children singing, or recognition of all the amazing women who came before us. There really isn't anything in the service that we wouldn't do during any other service. But I make it a point to recognize it in some way.

All of this came to mind of a Twitter conversation yesterday. Someone pointed to [Stanley Hauerwas's lecture](#) at the Youth Academy at Duke, when he asked, "How many of you worship in a church that recognizes 'Mother's Day'?" Then he said, "I am sorry to tell you your salvation is in doubt."

Hauerwas reminds us that Christianity hard. He wants to wean us from the cultural trappings of our faith—especially the ones that have nothing to do with the words of Jesus.

I suppose it doesn't matter much in many of our mainline congregations. When the average age of our membership is pushing sixty, there are not many people in our pews getting up in the middle of the night to breastfeed. Mostly, our members are well past their child-bearing years.

Perhaps the salvation of our congregation is in doubt because I prayed a prayer. I preached about the Promised Land, from a mother's perspective. We prayed to Mother God. So be it.

If you haven't noticed, this has been a [bad year](#) for women and Christianity. The church has been [denying women contraception](#), [curtailing nuns](#), [calling wives into submission](#), and even [conducting an inquiry into the Girl Scouts](#). I figured the least the congregation could do was to give a few moms a small shout-out during the pastoral prayer.