

**Easter 5A**  
**The Rev. Emily Richards**  
**May 10, 2020**

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*God's Way of Mothering Love*

*In the name of the God of Love who is called by many names and is beyond all names. Amen.*

*~Attributed to the Rev. Frank Toia*

On this Mother's Day we celebrate and give thanks for all those who have given us God's motherly love and care, both the women and the men who have guided us along our journeys and helped shape our lives. I want to tell you about one such person in my life – my aunt Barbara, the older sister of my mother whom many of you know as Deacon Donna. Barbara is the self-proclaimed free spirit of our family. She's lived her life as an intrepid, curious traveler, having visited every continent, making a home in places as far away as Australia, and as close as Maine. Even though we go years without seeing each other, I've always felt deeply connected to her. During my childhood she would send me letters and those old-fashioned audio tapes describing in great detail her adventures. She was the first person in my life who opened my eyes to the world around me. Barbara immersed herself in the culture and customs of the places in which she felt privileged to be a part of. And she made friends across the globe.

My very first grand adventure was with her, of course. She took me and my brother to New York City. Our first time on an airplane and at the top of a skyscraper, in a taxi and on a subway. Which by the way is not an easy thing to navigate with your 12-year-old niece in a wheelchair and your 10-year-old nephew clinging to your side. Ask me sometime about our misadventure getting onto that New York subway. It was amazing traveling with Barbara because she was open to every new experience, every surprising encounter, eager to see what was awaiting us just around the corner. And even when she would come home to Kentucky to visit for months at a time she was never bored with the familiarity. I found her as curious and engaged in my life as she would've been with her neighbors in the outback of Australia and the strangers who welcomed her into their

homes in Indonesia. My love of journeying to new places and encountering those different from me, fascinated by our world as a traveler, is the greatest gift my aunt has given me.

Peter Marty, a Lutheran pastor and editor of *The Christian Century Magazine* reflects on the difference between a traveler and a tourist. He quotes a historian who writes, “The traveler is interested in unfamiliar settings and wild encounters that enlarge his perspective. He goes strenuously in search of people, of adventure, of experience. In contrast, the tourist is passive; he expects interesting things to happen to him. He goes sightseeing. Tourists engage in spectator sports full of contrived, prefabricated experiences.”

Two weeks ago, I spoke about the early Christians calling themselves the people of the Way. To follow the risen Christ, includes the willingness to enter into unfamiliar settings and be open to encounters that expand one’s vision of God and God’s kingdom. Peter Marty goes on to write that “according to John’s Gospel, Jesus told his followers, ‘I am the way.’ This expression contrasts sharply with ‘I am the answer,’ something many Christians assume he must have said but didn’t. The difference between the two self-descriptions is huge. The former invites grand adventure and openness to all of the ambiguities and doubts that go with a journey along uncertain paths. The latter suggests a packaged arrangement—a relationship involving little risk.”

Pondering the words from John’s Gospel this morning, I remembered my friend Frank Toia and the sermon he preached at the celebration of his 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary to the ordination of his priesthood. In it, Frank shares the admonition his seminary mentor gave him upon going to Japan, the place in which he would be ordained. “Remember, Frank, you’re not taking God in your suitcase. Go and find out what God is already doing there.” This piece of advice shaped the way Frank would carry out his priesthood. Frank’s own understanding of “I am the way” grew over the years from an exclusive statement of belief into an invitation to go deeper into the mystery of the divine’s presence through encounters with those most different from him.

A story John Philip Newell tells in his book, *A New Harmony, the Spirit, the Earth and the Human Soul* helped Frank free these words from the narrow interpretation he had been

taught. "A Rabbi was once asked what he thought of the words attributed to Jesus, 'I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me?' These words that have been so used to exclusivize the Christian treasure. And, of course the subtext of how we have used them historically, is 'WE are the way, the truth and the life, nobody comes to the Father except through our sacraments, through our practices, through our beliefs.' But the rabbi responded to the questioner and said, 'Oh, I completely agree with these words.' The questioner was dumbfounded and asked, "How can you, as a rabbi agree with these words?' To which the Rabbi responded, 'I believe that Jesus' way was the way of love; I believe that Jesus' truth was the truth of love; I believe that Jesus' life was a life of love. No one comes to the Father but through love.'"

My aunt Barbara and my friend Frank were kindred spirits, always up for another adventure, willing to risk the security and certainty of their own path in order to find new meaning through the wisdom they found in the truth of a fellow traveler. At different points in my life, both served as spiritual companions, freeing me from the need to carry God in my suitcase; and opening my heart and mind to seek God's way of love among people and places that I might not have welcomed, otherwise.

Mothers are those who nurture, love and protect. But they also push us out of the nest, equipping and encouraging us to follow our own path and to engage in the beauty and goodness our world has to offer. May each of us be gifted with many mothers throughout our lives. And may we be that gift for others we meet along the way. The one who tells his friends, "Do not let your hearts be troubled" is the same one who invites us to journey with him as a traveler and not a tourist, entering into the wild mystery that is God's way of mothering love, ever expanding, transforming and emboldening our fearful hearts to step out in faith and share in this grand adventure with Him. *Amen.*