

Devotion, Seventh Week of Eastertide, 2024

Rev. Jeanne Simpson

Celebrations of mothers and motherhood can be traced back to the ancient Greeks and Romans, who held festivals in honor of the mother goddesses Rhea and Cybele, but the clearest modern precedent for Mother's Day is the early Christian festival known as "Mothering Sunday." Once a major tradition in the United Kingdom and parts of Europe, this celebration fell on the fourth Sunday in Lent and was originally seen as a time when the faithful would return to their "mother church"—the main church in the vicinity of their home—for a special service. Over time the Mothering Sunday tradition shifted into a more secular holiday, and children would present their mothers with flowers and other tokens of appreciation. This custom eventually faded in popularity before merging with the American Mother's Day in the 1930s and 1940s.

The origins of Mother's Day as celebrated in the United States date back to the 19th century. In the years before the Civil War, Ann Reeves Jarvis of West Virginia helped start "Mothers' Day Work Clubs" to teach local women how to properly care for their children. These clubs later became a unifying force in a region of the country still divided over the Civil War. In 1868 Jarvis organized "Mothers' Friendship Day," at which mothers gathered with former Union and Confederate soldiers to promote reconciliation.

American activist Anna Jarvis created the American Mother's Day holiday in honor of her mother, Ann Reeves Jarvis. Jarvis promised to fulfill those wishes after her mother's death in 1905 to honor her memory. On May 10, 1908, Jarvis held what is considered by many to be the first Mother's Day celebration. In addition to conducting a memorial service in Philadelphia to honor all mothers, Jarvis sent 500 white carnations to her late mother's church in West Virginia, a flower that would come to be a symbol of the holiday. The celebration rapidly caught on, and President Woodrow Wilson officially designated the second Sunday of May as Mother's Day on May 9, 1914.

Mother churches and our own mothers – forces of nurture that we are blessed to receive on this wonderful holiday. On Sunday we had our oldest mother present – Angie Tharpe – and our youngest mother present – Elizabeth Truett. A wonderful span of the love that these women have shared with their children, and all of us.

Jeanne