

God's extended family: Reflections on Mother's Day

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [May 16, 2006](#) issue

In terms of commercial activity, Mother's Day is the third-biggest holiday in the U.S., with 140 million greeting cards sold and \$7 billion spent on presents and meals—and 60 million roses. Robert Fulghum assembled this information for his book *It Was on Fire When I Lay Down on It* two decades ago, and I rediscovered it in my "Mother" file. Fulghum, who was a Unitarian minister, remembers that his congregation had clear expectations for the second Sunday in May. One woman said: "I'm bringing my mother to church on Mother's Day, Reverend, and you can talk about anything you want. But it had better include Mother, and it had better be good."

During my first year in the pastorate, the church organist informed me that for years on Mother's Day the congregation had been singing "Faith of Our Fathers" with "Mother" substituted for "Father," and that it would not be a good idea to mess with it. This was decades before we became sensitive to gender-exclusive language, but that wasn't the point. The people simply wanted some recognition for mothers on Mother's Day.

Dick Rasmussen, an early mentor of mine, observes that in addition to the second Sunday of May, everyone has another Mother's Day—the day we were born. Our birthday is the real Mother's Day. All we did was show up, Dick points out. Our mothers did all the work.

Still, Mother's Day gives us an opportunity to think about marriage and family. The Bible is very realistic about the topic—after all, even its first family is a disaster. Husband and wife lead each other into sin; each tries to avoid personal responsibility. He blames her, she blames the snake, and they are thrown out of their home. One of their sons murders his brother in a fit of jealousy. Noah curses a son for discovering him naked and drunk. Abraham lies and deserts his wife to save his neck.

The Bible is not romantic about families. But it does use familial and parental language and metaphor. When he talks about God, Jesus uses a stunning Aramaic word, "Abba," the intimate word for father. And when St. Paul tries to explain what has happened to the human-divine relationship in Jesus Christ, he chooses familial and parental language. In Christ we have been adopted by God. We who were orphans now have a parent and, by extension, a family. The God who is known as creator is now known in Christ as parent.

Mother's Day is also an occasion to say a word about children. The truest measure of any social or political policy is its impact on children. On Mother's Day we can affirm that how we fund public education is a moral issue, that access to health care, healthy food, day care and a preschool experience like Head Start are all issues about which people of faith care deeply.