

Does Mother's Day Belong in the Church?

by Taryn R. Hutchison

Emily* walked into church alone that Mother's Day. The two women greeters welcomed her and then reached around her to pin a carnation on another woman.

"But I'm a mother, too. I'll always be Jack's mommy," Emily told herself, too devastated to ask the women why they had overlooked her.

She had carried Jack for nine months, given birth to him, loved him, and cared for him. She had even been forced to do something that most of these smiling women with corsages had never done. She had buried her son a few months ago.

Her two-month old baby, Jack, had died of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. People in the church expressed their sympathy at the time, but soon after it seemed as though they pretended that Jack had never been born.

Everything had been so different just one year before. She and her husband Ray* had glided into church, excited about their future. Obviously expecting, Emily had received a flower from the greeters. Ray treated her to lunch at her favorite restaurant afterward. It was a day filled with promise. But Mother's Day will no longer be a happy day for her.

As a small child, Cate* loved playing with baby dolls. She internalized the message she heard repeatedly, "When you grow up, you'll be such a good mommy." It looked as though she would get her wish when she found her true love and married him right out of college.

The first few years, she and Dave* enjoyed being newlyweds. Then they started trying to conceive. Every month, disappointment took the place of hope – every month for 15 years.

They visited countless fertility specialists. Cate spent her thirties on some sort of fertility drug or another.

“It got to the point where I could not handle going to church on Mother’s Day,” Cate said. “All the sermons about the importance of motherhood – they were preaching to the choir with me. What I needed to hear was that I still had value as a non-mother. And all the women who were so happy, being congratulated by everyone. It just magnified my unhappiness. I would just sit there and sob. So I stopped going. Dave would go and make excuses for me.”

Mother’s Day is supposed to be a happy celebration, but it is a joyless day for many.

According to CNN.com on May 9, 2006, “Two million babies die in [their] first 24 hours each year worldwide. . . . As Americans celebrate Mother’s Day on Sunday, ‘5,000 mothers will mourn the loss of the newborn they bear that very day in the developing world,’ said Anne Tinker, director of Save the Children’s Saving Newborn Lives initiative.”

About 12 percent of women (7.3 million) in the United States aged 15-44 had difficulty getting pregnant or carrying a baby to term in 2002, according to the National Center for Health Statistics of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. That means that in a church of 500 people, with more than half being women, over 30 women could be struggling with fertility issues.

“It was the Sunday I hated most of the whole year,” writes Marlo Schalesky in her book “Empty Womb, Aching Heart”. “There was a huge vase at the front of the church filled with dozens of beautiful long-stemmed pink roses. . . One rose for each mother in the congregation. Of course, I wouldn’t receive one because I was childless.”

With all the hurting mothers and women who wish they had children, perhaps we, as the body of Christ, can rethink how to honor mothers on Mother’s Day while still providing comfort and hope to the rest. Is it worth making the women who already feel encouraged (whose healthy children appreciate them) feel a little bit better at the expense of making the ones who feel badly feel a whole lot worse?

Pastor Martin Jones started a new approach in his church in Brea, California. Every woman in the congregation received a red rose on Mother’s Day, regardless of marital or reproductive status. “I knew women who would not come to church on Mother’s Day because it was just too painful,” Jones said. “I also struggled with our tradition of recognizing the youngest and oldest mother. The youngest was often an unmarried teenage girl.”

Another church in Colorado decided to do something positive on Mother’s Day. They banded together to serve mothers in need in a very practical way, offering free car repairs for single moms that weekend. Other pastors briefly acknowledge Mother’s Day in the worship service, but leave the celebrating to the children and husbands.

In honoring mothers, let us not forget the ones who are hurting. Let us remember the Emilys and Cates. We can become the arms of Jesus, embracing his dearly loved daughters and helping them become whole.

* Names changed to protect privacy.