

“Stabat Mater” A sermon based on Psalm 66:8-20, Acts 17:22-31 and John 14:15-21 delivered on Mother’s Day, May 10, 2026 by the Rev. Alison Dutton Jacobs at the First Congregational UCC of Onekama, Michigan,

We do not know what Antonin Dvorak’s relationship with his mother was like, but we suspect that he had a special feeling for mothers and their role in the world as two of his most famous works honor mothers. What we do know is that he was the oldest of eight children and that oldest sons often hold a pivotal place in the family in relationship to their mothers.

The solo that Steve sang so beautifully for us this morning ““O Mother’s Love” with words by I.M. Gordon (1978) is written to a tune which is very familiar to us written by William B Bradbury as “Sweet Hour of Prayer.” This seems very appropriate to me because the time that I would pray with my mother before I went to bed each night was certainly a sweet time for me as a little girl.

Another wonderful solo for Mother’s Day is “Songs My Mother Taught Me” which takes the words of a poem by Adolph Heyduk and sets it to music. It is the fourth song in a cycle of seven songs based on Heyduk’s poems called “Gypsy Melodies.” While the words are Heyduk’s the feeling of the music is all Dvorak. Dvorak’s emotive music speaks of our great nostalgia in our love for our mothers.

Dvorak’s other famous work featuring mothers is his sacred Cantata, the Stabat Mater. This ten-movement extended work for soloists, choir, and orchestra is based on the 13th Christian Hymn, written either by Franciscan Friar Jacopone da Todi or Pope Innocent the III, portrays the suffering of Jesus’ mother Mary at his crucifixion. The title comes from the first line of the hymn “Stabat Mater dolorosa,” which means “*the sorrowful mother was standing.*” It is conjectured that part of his impetus to write this work was that his first three children all died very young within a year of each other. The idea being that he knew firsthand,

through the suffering of his wife, and his own suffering, how hard it is to just stand by as one's helpless little ones succumb to death.

When I hear the stark words "Stabat Mater," the mother stood, I, of course, think of my own mother who, very pregnant with my oldest sister, stood on the hill at LaJolla, California overlooking the empty Navy docks at San Diego, knowing that my father's ship had left for the war in the Pacific and she may not ever see him again. She had gone to Sacramento to take her Nursing Board exams, and when she returned the ships were just gone. She stood there then and she stood throughout the many deployments and hardship tours of my fathers' Marine Corps career of over 30 years. She stood with me and my four sisters and created a solid center for us all. My mother knew about what it meant to just stand and keep the faith. One of her favorite quotes was the last line of John Milton's sonnet "When I Consider How My Light is Spent," written as he was going blind. The last line reads "They also serve who only stand and wait." Boy, did she know about that!

When Mary stood at the foot of the cross, we are reminded that Jesus' actions throughout the gospel did not seem to be particularly sentimental towards his mother. At the wedding at Cana when his mother asks him to do something about the wine supply—he turns to her and calling her just by what seems to be a generic term "woman" he mildly rebukes her saying "what concern is that to you or me?" Later when he is teaching in the temple and the officials come to tell him that his mother and brothers are there—waiting outside, he waves the whole issue aside, saying who is my mother? And my brothers? Anyone who does the will of the father are my family—seemingly to brush aside his earthly family as being insignificant.

But it is precisely here that we must begin to have some understanding of our scriptural lesson for the Johannine community which are offered for us this morning. For the author of the gospel of John is trying to point us to a significant

truth. Here we hear Jesus saying he will not leave us orphaned. Although we all have human parents, Jesus reminds us that he will provide us with a divine “Advocate,” a representative of God, the Holy Parent, to guide us. And in our Acts passage, Luke the historian, has Paul tell the Athenians that “we are God’s offspring.”

This is all brought into focus, on a human level, when we remember what, in the end, Jesus' mother actually meant to him. This is the very theme of Dvorak’s Stabat Mater. For there is hardly a more tender and significant scene in or biblical witness than some of the last words that Christ uttered while he was still with us. When Jesus looked down from the cross and saw his mother standing there—just standing there-- he must have felt a well of deep compassion for this woman who had had to stand by him and watch and “ponder” so much in her heart, no matter how hard it was for her to do. And so, he arranges for her adoption into the family of another Jewish male. He looks down from the cross and very simply says: "Women here is your son," and to the disciple, "Here is your mother."

The mother stood. She stood in sorrow, yes, but she also stood in solidarity with her son. Her heart no doubt was broken, but we know through the scriptural witness that her understanding of his destiny was strong. All those things which were told to her by the angels and the Holy Spirit. All those times that we are told she “pondered these things in her heart” (Luke 2:19) helped her to stand there.

The Stabat Mater was the oratorio in which my son, Ian, sang with the Choral Union at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in the ‘90s. We lived in Minnesota at the time, and drove over for the concert. We got there really early so we were able to get into the Hall as soon as it opened. It was an open seating event, so we had the luxury of the pick of the best seats in the house which were in the center, about 10 rows back.

As the choir filed in, I was delighted to see that Ian (so handsome in a full tux!) was positioned in almost the exact center of the choir. I still get goosebumps when I try to describe the feeling I had as the music flowed around me. It was as if the entire audience and the bulk of the choir faded into the background and it was just Ian alone singing to me, his mother. He was saying to me Stabat Mater – you, my mother-you stood. When we adopted Ian, he had come from abuse. He would back dive off my lap when I tried to cuddle him, he would not make eye contact. As he was my first child, I found all this so hard. I would spend hours lying next to him on a blanket on the floor and talk to him to try to get some eye contact. No dice. It wasn't until he was about 10 years old and we were on the ferry between Peaks Island and Portland that it happened—he left his friends who were making loop to loops around the poles on the deck of the ferry –stood directly in front of me, gave me full eye contact, and said, “Hey, Mom, I love you!” and then ran back to his friends. From the stage at that concert, what I heard him saying through the music, is “and the mother stood”—you, my mother, stood, all those years you stood and waited.

The Mother's Day that we celebrate today, is a holiday started by Anna Jarvis in 1908 to honor her own mother. But it is also good to remember that Mothers' Day (notice where the apostrophe falls) was originally started in the 1870's as a women's anti-war peace movement in response to the horror and tragedy of the Civil War and the immanent outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War. Julia Ward Howe, the very same writer of the Battle Hymn of the Republic, would later write this call to action: “Why do not the mothers of mankind interfere in these matters, to prevent the waste of human life of which they alone know and bear the cost?”

Julia Ward Howe, as a mother, stood. As the wife of an abusive husband who constantly reminded her that she would lose her children to him if she left, Julia

stood her ground. She went about working through peace movements and women's clubs in an attempt to bring all women to the understanding that their voice should be heard.

As we celebrate all mothers today—biological, adoptive, foster and all persons who have been mothers to us—we remember especially Jesus' mother, whose silent vigil – the literal “Stabat Mater”-- is describe in the beautiful 13th Century Latin hymn in this way:

At the Cross her station keeping,
stood the mournful Mother weeping,
close to her Son to the last.

Through her heart, His sorrow sharing,
all His bitter anguish bearing,
now at length the sword has passed.

O how sad and sore distressed
was that Mother, highly blest,
of the sole-begotten One.

Christ above in torment hangs,
she beneath beholds the pangs
of her dying glorious Son.

Is there one who would not weep,
whelmed in miseries so deep,
Christ's dear Mother to behold?

Who, indeed! Amen.