

Sermon: "Getting the Mother Involved"

Scripture: Book of Wisdom 6-8

Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans

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One of Rev. Judy's mentors was a professor at Andover Newton Seminary and a UCC pastor named Rev. Mary Luti. Our church has had her come speak on a couple occasions in the past, I believe, so some of you know of her. She grew up in a very Catholic home and became a Roman Catholic nun for 20 years before she left that order and became a Protestant minister here in the Boston area. As she tells the story, she wasn't supposed to be called Mary originally but, Janice, after her grandmother Janetta, but supposedly her mother had a really difficult time at her birth. Luti suggests that she's always had broad shoulders and that's why. According to family lore, Luti's mother as a good Catholic had a strong devotion to Jesus' mother Mary and could be heard screaming at one point during the birth "ok, just get me out of this and I'll name her Mary!" and that's how she got her name.

Rev. Mary Luti speaks of how struck she was when she first entered the Protestant church by how silent Protestants were on Mary. Other than a teenager dressing up as her during the Christmas pageant, Mary isn't acknowledged much in Protestant religious practice. But we do have many former Catholics among us in our denomination known as the UCC, the United Church of Christ, and maybe even some among us who still consider themselves Catholic and yet have also found a faith home among us, which is a beautiful and an appropriate thing since we as a denomination seek to be a UNITED church of

Christ, committed to a philosophy articulated by an early reformer : in essentials unity, in nonessentials liberty and in all things love.

So even though we aren't in the practice of praying to Mary as Protestants, trust me when I say that we have among us devoted church folk who do in fact hold Mary, the Mother of God, as important in their lives. There would have been a time in our history where I as a Protestant Minister might have enjoined you to "smoke them out so we can correct their heretical ways!" but then again in those times and with those old and tired theologies, I wouldn't be your Lead Pastor either since my wife is Catholic and my daughters raised within both traditions, but officially are Catholic themselves. I'd be the one smoked out!

But thankfully, you and we are better than that and we see the diversity among us as a blessing that enriches us rather than a threat. And so there is much to learn on this Mother's Day Sunday from our Catholic brothers and sisters, lapsed or not, who make a place for Mary in their spiritual lives.

We Protestants can tend to have a knee-jerk response to Catholic Marian theology that goes right back to the Protestant Reformation when our forebearers broke from the Catholic Church because we could stand no more for the mediator role that the church was insisting on playing between believers and God. The protestant claim that we are all priests, the Priesthood of the Believer, as it was known, was an insistence in the sacrosanct nature of a person and their relationship with God and that no one, no priest, no bishop, no pope, no institution could come in the way of that, period! So the devotion to Mary as a mediator then of course fell the way of other Catholic practices that in any suggest that we don't have direct access to God.

Interestingly though, in the Middle Ages before the Reformation, the popularity of Mary and all the patron saints that surfaced in those centuries arose in response to what had become a too distant God contained by a too patriarchal and hierarchical church structure such that even Jesus himself was the perfectly Holy Christ on a distant throne inaccessible to the common person. So patron saints, figures of profound faithful lives, women and men, became those to whom the common people turned for access to this distant God. And there at the center of that large communion of saints sat Mary, Jesus' Mother, known also therefore as the Mother of God.

Protestants tend to misunderstand Catholic teaching around Mary, that she is not an object of worship, which would rightly be problematic, but an object of devotion. One asks Mary to pray or intercede for you as you might ask a friend. Even those of us who understand that we all have direct access to God find it important and comforting to know that someone else is praying for us. This is the role that Mary plays for many Catholics and Orthodox as well as some Protestants here and there. As the UCC scholar and Church History professor, Mark Burrows, says when he teaches about devotion to Mary in Catholic and Orthodox practice – “there's simply something very practical and very powerful about getting the mother involved!” Yep! We all know that truth, don't we?!

And there's something very important that we should consider as Protestants if it's not going to be through devotion to Mary, then how are going to get the divine feminine involved. While the patriarchy of the church has no doubt coopted Mary at times and used her as an example of the meek and mild and submissive woman who is defined only in relation to male figures Mary, in Catholic and Orthodox teaching, has also mitigated the patriarchy and offered a

more feminine access point to God, a point that we Protestants might envy... even with many denominations open to having women ministers and priests, we've still been slow to break down the exclusively patriarchal language, imagery and framing of the Christian faith in many of our churches.

That's why on this Mother's Day Sunday, we wanted to emphasize the divine feminine in our scripture and our hymns and testimonies, to remind ourselves of the importance of exploring feminine and not just masculine access points to God and our mothers can help us do that.

As I mentioned, Tracy, my wife, is Catholic and we laugh sometimes about a couple of songs that we wooed each other with when we were first dating almost 25 years ago. I can just see our daughters rolling their eyes at the thought of these songs being a part of our falling in love! The one she talks about stirring her heart was when I was playing folk song for her one night on my guitar and then shared with her kind of out of blue a scripture I had set to music – Proverbs 3:4, “trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not upon your own understanding, etc.. and she was like “oh, be still my beating heart!” And later in our courtship, Tracy, who isn't all that comfortable singing in public, as we sat in the car overlooking a beautiful CT countryside scene sang for this Baptist born and bred son, the Salve Regina. And I thought as I listened. “Ok, I'm marrying this woman!”

Many Catholics might know this ancient Latin song from the Middle Ages but most of us born and bred Protestants wouldn't. It's a lovely one that you really should hear in a beautiful chapel with 40 nuns singing it in unison to get the full effect but I thought I'd end my sermon with it. The words I find particularly poignant in this time of quarantine especially the lines “to thee do we send up our

sighs, mourning and weeping in this valley of tears. Turn then most gracious advocate thine eyes of mercy toward us and after this our exile show unto us the blessed fruit of thy womb Jesus. O clement, O loving, O sweet virgin Mary.” Whether we are Catholic, Orthodox or Protestant, Mary is a profound part of our tradition and I think it’s worth maybe in our prayers, getting the mother involved!

*Salve, Regina, Mater misericordiæ,
vita, dulcedo, et spes nostra, salve.
Ad te clamamus exsules filii Hevæ,
Ad te suspiramus, gementes et flentes
in hac lacrimarum valle.
Eia, ergo, advocata nostra, illos tuos
misericordes oculos ad nos converte;
Et Jesum, benedictum fructum ventris tui,
nobis post hoc exsilium ostende.
O clemens, O pia, O dulcis Virgo Maria.*