

Our Foremothers in Faith

Today, we celebrate Mother's day, or as it is called in the UK, Mothering Day, a more encompassing title. Some pastors dread Mother's day sermons for various and often good reasons. Our secular world does a marvelous job with all the hype and commercialism. From the perspective of the church, I thought that today would be the perfect time to celebrate our foremothers in faith. Throughout the history of the Bible, women of faith have often been treated as peripheral to the story at hand, with the significance of their actions, and accomplishments greatly diminished or ignored. Even today, many of the contributions our mothers of faith have made, have gone unnoticed.

Back in the beginning - Sarah, Abraham's wife, answered God's call to forsake her homeland Ur, and moved to Canaan, putting her faith in God and his promise. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and their wives Sarah, Rebekah, Leah and Rachel have been designated as the patriarchs and matriarchs of Israel, being the first to recognize God and to believe in his promises.

Esther, heroine of the Jewish book bearing her name, was a beautiful Jewess who became the queen of the Persian king Xerxes I. When Haman, the prime minister, encouraged the king to issue an edict of extermination of the Jews, Esther, urged by her cousin Mordecai, begged for the life of her people. The king acceded to her pleas, and Haman himself was hanged on the gallows prepared for Mordecai. By saving her people, Esther was able to preserve their faith and culture.

Deborah was a Jewish judge - a good and fair judge. Deborah led the Israelites against Jabin, king of Canaan. She encouraged her general, Barak, to attack the enemy while the river was in full flood. The Canaanites were incapacitated by their iron chariots and the Israelites won a famous victory. Deborah's song of triumph is thought to be one of the earliest Hebrew poems in existence. She and Hannah, the mother of Samuel, were the only two women who composed hymns to God unequaled by men.

Until recently, traditional efforts to identify the core of Jesus' ministry have tended to lessen women's contribution. That is primarily because we have only had male voices to draw upon. But, women are now interpreting these texts with their own eyes, minds and hearts. Women's roles, which had been seen as peripheral and mundane, are now understood as central and worthy of imitation. Figures other than the twelve male disciples colour the ministry of Jesus. The women in the New Testament can be looked upon as sisters who reveal God afresh to their congregations.

Mary Magdalene, a follower of Jesus, ministered to him in Galilee. She remained close to the Cross with other women, when the male disciples had fled. And she was the first to meet the risen Christ, being charged to proclaim the resurrection to the eleven. For that reason, she was called 'the apostle to the apostles.' However, Pope Gregory I, merged Mary Magdalene with two other Marys: the sinner who anointed Jesus, as recorded in Luke's gospel, and Mary of Bethany, who also anointed Jesus, as recorded in John's gospel.

Pope Gregory managed to produce a composite figure of the sexually deviant penitent. From this, "Magdalene" became a term for prostitutes who had turned to Christ, and for the Houses which took them in, sometimes as specific religious orders. There is, however, no ground for Gregory's characterization, which has been abandoned even by the Roman Catholic Church. Mary Magdalene is now recognized as a pioneering representative of women's ministry, for which there is much evidence in the New Testament, but which was rapidly suppressed by men in the church until its spasmodic but accumulating recovery in the 20th century.

As for the Samaritan woman at the well, although nameless, Jesus' conversation with her is the longest private conversation recorded in the Gospels. For the first time, Jesus declared openly, and yet to a woman, that he was the Messiah. The Samaritan woman at the well became the first missionary or evangelist, for "Many Samaritans of that town had believed on the strength of the woman's testimony."

To another woman, a sister of Lazarus, probably Mary, Jesus revealed the greatest and most astonishing mystery, that he himself is the Resurrection. Once, while visiting the siblings, Martha who was busy preparing dinner while Mary was sitting at Jesus' feet, complained that Mary was not helping her. Jesus said, "My dear Martha, you are worried and upset over all these details! There is only one thing worth being concerned about. Mary has discovered it, and it will not be taken away from her." Here, again, Jesus shows his respect, acceptance and encouragement of women as disciples.

The rapport Jesus had with women led Him into recognizing the unique ministry of women. Not only had women ministered to him, but Jesus charged women to minister to the needs of the world. In Luke's gospel, women are included in the number of those who accompanied Jesus through the cities and towns he travelled, preaching and teaching, winning souls, and healing by faith unbridled.

Luke ascribes to the women their ministerial task, which is identical to the duties assigned to the men who followed Jesus. All three Synoptic Gospels use the same word (*diakoneo*), meaning to minister or to serve to describe the duties of these women, in addition to saying that they "followed" Jesus. The early Church recognized these women as disciples, as it did the twelve men who followed Christ.

Luke mentions another interesting detail. It was the women who provided for the apostles out of their own resources. Women, by the invitation of Jesus, travelled about with the Twelve, highly unusual at the time. The mother of the sons of Zebedee was not expected to stay at home; she went with her two sons and left the father in his fishing boat. The prospect of travelling with Jesus appealed to the elite Jewish women with means, who were able to financially support the group - helping its members spread the gospel.

Among the women who followed Jesus in Galilee and who were present at his Passion and who were the first to see him at the Resurrection, nine are mentioned by name. They were; Mary, the mother of Jesus; Mary, the wife of Cleophas; Mary

Magdalene; Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuaz; Susanna, the mother of the sons of Zebedee; Salome; Mary, the mother of James; and Mary, the mother of James the younger and Joseph.

There are indications that this group of women may have paralleled the Twelve. There is a mosaic in the *Titulus* Church of Saint Praxedis where the busts of the apostles with Jesus in the centre and the busts of eight women together with Mary the mother of Jesus in the centre and two deacons on either side of her. It gives the impression of a tradition of a collateral group of apostles of both men and women.

Lydia, the seller of purple cloth, an upper-class Gentile woman was not the only Gentile to convert. Many Greek women followed. Early Christian women were not only converts, but workers with Paul and by themselves in spreading the message of Jesus. Sometimes, they were the source of Paul's knowledge of what was occurring in the churches, something we don't often hear about.

New Testament accounts show that women naturally assumed administrative duties in the apostolic period. For instance, all assemblies of Christian communities mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles are said to be in the houses of women: the church in the house of Chloe, in the house of Lydia, in the house of the mother of Mark, in the house of Nympha, in the house of Prisca (Priscilla) and Aquila.

Early Christian assemblies were customarily held in the houses of women, so that it is no surprise that Saint John, in his second Epistle, addresses it to an "Elect Lady," a woman in the position of overseer of a church community. At the end of the epistle, John also refers to the addressee's sister, an overseer in another church. So, our first Christian mothers of faith played very important roles in the spread of the gospel of our resurrected Lord and the establishment of early churches.

Catherine of Sienna, is a Christian saint who saw a vision of Christ when she was seven, after which she took a vow of virginity. She became a member of the Third Order of Dominicans at the age of 16, committing herself to work among the poor and sick. Her holiness became widely known and she attracted many followers.

She wrote many letters as well as a spiritual work called *Dialogo*, in which she relates contemplation and action, starting in the cell of 'self-knowledge' in order to know the work and love of God in relation to oneself, but moving into the world on that basis because God is known beyond doubt as love. She placed great emphasis on the nobility of humans made in the image of God.

Teresa of Avila was a Spanish Carmelite nun and mystic. She entered the Carmelite convent of Incarnation at Avila in 1535. After years of a fairly lax discipline, she was drawn to a stricter life, encouraged by her extraordinary mystical experiences. In 1562, she founded the convent of St. Joseph of Avila, the first of the houses of the Carmelite Reform. Her reform met with much opposition, but she found support from, among others, St. John of the Cross.

Alongside her reform, she wrote several books on spiritual life for her nuns. In these, she traces the spiritual life from its beginnings to union with God in the spiritual marriage, and illustrates its stages from her own experience. Her classification of the various stages of prayer - recollection - quiet - union - has been enormously influential. In her autobiography, surprisingly we discover that she was not terribly fond of Martin Luther. She really didn't like him.

Katherine von Bora, a former nun, married Luther. Together they created the first parsonage - and - an example of the Protestant concept of Christian family life. Luther's ideas on marriage established the family at the centre of the church and society. Thus, the role of wife and mother gained new prestige and importance. Besides the significance of companionship and compatibility in marriage, Luther also had a perception of something approaching partnership in marriage. Cooperation and mutual respect were of the utmost importance. Raising children was a shared responsibility with the parents working together for the benefit of the

child. For most Protestant leaders, the family became the setting for practicing Christian values and building Christian character.

Recognition of the dignity of married and family life made a positive contribution to concepts of women's roles in early modern Europe. Motherhood and the family unit were given an emotional, religious, and social importance, giving women's roles new respect. This was an important shift in the attitude toward the role of the mother. Bearing and raising children, supervising the household, and teaching the catechism to the children became a respected role and duty of the mother. There were no Sunday Schools or Confirmation classes. That was the role of the mother, who had to be knowledgeable in these matters.

Protestant pastors, in their sermons, consciously raised the role of wife and mother to a new level of importance and respect. The vocation of wife and mother gained recognition as God-given with religious and social importance.

To demonstrate how significant the role of mothers in the religious instruction of their children is, one of my seminary professors said the words: "Jesus Loves Me, This I know, for the Bible tells me so," should be; "Jesus Loves Me, This I know, for my mother told me so." That is probably true for most of us.

Olympia Brown was the first woman in the United States to be ordained by a denominational body in June of 1863 by the Northern Universalist Association. She successfully combined marriage, motherhood and ministry.

Helen Barrett Montgomery accomplished many firsts in her life. But the most outstanding was the 1924 publication of her translation of the New Testament from the Greek into modern English for the Baptist Publication Societies' 100th anniversary. No woman had ever done this before. Her work was scholarly, as well as being done in the words of everyday life. The original translation, titled *The Centenary Translation of the New Testament*, has had dozens of reprints and is still published under the title, *The New Testament in Modern English*.

Georgia Elma Harkness was the first American woman to gain wide recognition as a theologian and certainly the first woman ever to hold a professorship at a theological seminary as well as the first woman member of the American Theological Society. She graduated with her PhD from Boston University in 1923. She was a prolific religious writer. Her first book was published in 1922, and her last in 1974.

Probably one of the best-known mothers of faith of our time is Mother Teresa, founder of the Missionaries of Charity, winner of the Templeton Prize and the Nobel Peace Prize. After a brief period in Ireland, she joined the Sisters of Loreto to work in India. Upon completing her noviceship in Darjeeling, she was sent to teach in Calcutta. In her spare time she worked among the very poor and the sick, and in 1948 she left the Sisters of Loreto, gained some medical knowledge, and returned to Calcutta to found her own order. Her nuns, in their distinctive sari-like habits, are now to be found all over the world, working with the poorest in society.

She spread the gospel of Jesus Christ with love, compassion, humbleness, extraordinary faith, and a sense of humour. In her book of prayers and meditations, Mother Teresa describes joy: "Joy is prayer; joy is strength; joy is love; joy is a net of love with which you can catch souls. God loves a cheerful giver. She gives most who gives with joy. The best way to show our gratitude to God and the people is to accept everything with joy. A joyful heart is the inevitable result of a heart burning with love. Never let anything so fill you with sorrow as to make you forget the joy of the Christ risen."

We all long for heaven where God is, but we have in our power to be in heaven with him right now - to be happy with him at this very moment. But being happy with him now means: loving as he loves; helping as he helps; giving as he gives; serving as he serves; rescuing as he rescues; being with him for all the 24 hours; touching him in his distressing disguise.

We are all fortunate to be able to share in the legacy that our foremothers in faith have left us. And there were many of them throughout the Old Testament, the Gospels, the early Christian church, the middle ages, and the modern age. There were also many women martyrs who gave their lives for their faith and their Lord. They were strong, faithful, devout women, who through their life choices, their actions, sacrifices, sufferings, prayers, answering "yes" to God's call, have passed on their faith to us - proclaiming the love of God, and the Gospel of Jesus Christ to all the world.

As noted throughout the Gospels, Jesus had a special place in his heart for the women who followed him, his female disciples. He shows that he loved, respected, and appreciated them. During Luther's time, the status and respect of women, and especially mothers was uplifted.

So, what happened? Why are women, our mothers and sisters, abused, sex traded, murdered, and regarded as less than. We seem to have forgotten that we all, our grandmothers, mothers, aunts, sisters, daughters are created in the image of God. We have forgotten how Jesus treated, respected, loved and appreciated his female disciples. We do not always follow his example.

Let us remember that we are all children of God, including our Indigenous sisters, mothers, aunts and daughters who did not experience the love, care, respect and compassion they deserved. They were murdered, they disappeared, they became part of the sex trade and they were forgotten. Let us, all, remember them, and thank God for their lives. Let us thank God for our foremothers of faith, and the great gift, the gift of faith and love they have left us.

Amen.

Prayers of Intercession for May 12, 2024

Holy One, we gather in your presence to give you thanks and to celebrate the gift of your motherly love, both gentle and fierce, both strong and humble, both kind and true. Your love has given birth to the whole of Creation, your love supports and nurtures us, your love cares enough to correct us, and challenges us in ways that strengthen and transform us. We offer you praise and thanksgiving for your unfailing presence in our lives and for all of the blessings you so generously give to us.

Loving God, we thank you for the gift of motherhood and for the many examples of faithful mothers in scripture: women like Sarah, Hannah, Elizabeth, Mary, and Lois. We give thanks for mothers the world over. We celebrate all those who have nurtured and cared for us, remembering especially, birth mothers, adoptive mothers, surrogate mothers, spiritual mothers, aunties, grandmothers, teachers, neighbours, and all women who have been a mothering presence to us.

God of generations, thank you for the gift of faith kindled and rekindled in us through the years. And thank you for those what have taught us and encouraged us in our faith in sincerity and love. Today, we give special thanks and praise for our church mothers, the women who, like Timothy's mother and grandmother, steadily and without much recognition teach a new generation of children about the love of Jesus.

And we celebrate the matriarchs who build up with compassion and strong shoulders young women and girls, revealing a deep spiritual life and love woven into the fabric of our church family.

God of compassion and joy, we know motherhood is a wide spectrum and our life together is big enough to stand in solidarity with all mothers. For the seen and unseen grief and struggles of women and mothers, we ache with you. For the seen and unseen joys of motherhood, we rejoice and celebrate with you.

Loving God, we need your comfort here today, because some are missing mothers, some are missing children, some are parted by distance or death. Comfort those who have given up their child for adoption, or who chose not to give birth, and had an abortion. Comfort those who longed to be biological mothers and could not. We pray for those here whose mothers have disappointed them; we ask for grace in relationships where there is pain and bitterness, for healing in relationships where there is abuse and violence. We pray for mothers around the world; mothers who cannot feed their children, mothers who are homeless or without a homeland; mothers who must teach

their children about the dangers of bombs and bullets. Help us create a world where mothers can raise their children in peace and plenty.

We pray for the families of the many missing indigenous women and girls and two-spirited persons across our nation: For the beautiful Indigenous girls whose lives were, sister auntie, cousin, sibling, neighbour or friend. Hold their tears closely, and cruelly shortened; For the beautiful Indigenous women who were robbed of their potential; For the beautiful two-spirited people who were targeted because of bigotry. We pray for an end to violence against women and children in our own country and around the world. We pray for families whose search for their loved one continues, awaiting any word of hope that their loved one is found and alive, and for those families grieving the loss of a loved one, a mother, comfort them with your abiding presence. Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for all people around the world who especially need your hope this week:

The families and communities impacted and having fled their communities of Fort Nelson and the Fort Nelson nation at short notice because of the out-of-control fire; We pray for Deacon Denise Pawliuk and her husband recently relocated to Fort Nelson. May the lives of all people, including the firefighters, all pets, livestock and wildlife be spared from harm. In their distress surround them with your presence, provide them with hope and peace as they receive the support and aid offered by the welcoming neighbouring communities.

We pray for the communities affected by the floods in Brazil, where the death toll rose to 83, with dozens remaining missing; The people of the South African city of George, where six people have died with 48 so far unaccounted for after a multi-story building collapsed; The communities in Ruang Island, Indonesia, where almost 10,000 residents will have to be permanently relocated after volcanic eruptions; The families and communities left behind after at least 188 people were killed at Kenya's Maasai Mara nature reserve, after catastrophic flooding; The communities in Israel and Palestine as violence continues to take hold, many more of your children are killed, and the end of war seems far away.

We pray for all people in their daily life and work—for our families, friends, and neighbours, and for those who are alone. We name before you individuals and families experiencing personal hardship or facing an uncertain future; the homeless, those with inadequate housing, those suffering addiction, those who are separated from loved ones. Hear us Lord as we now lift up those people and those situations you have placed upon our hearts.

We give thanks for the ministry of Deacon Faith Nostbakken who convocated with her doctorate this Friday. We pray also that you would bless Elina Singh and her future ministry and call as she is ordained next Saturday.

We pray for our congregations and their leaders, bishops, pastors, priests, deacons, lay leaders and musicians: Bishops Linda, Susan, Anna and Kathy; our own congregation. Help our congregation be a space where people can feel mothered, their gifts and talents appreciated and nurtured. We pray for Mount Olive Lutheran in Surrey – Rev. Lori-Anne Boutin Crawford. On this seventh Sunday of Easter, we lift in prayer the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Jordan and the Holy Land.

Mothering God, who created mothers and blessed us with mothering figures in our lives; who came as a child, was raised in a family with an earthly mother, Mary. We give thanks for loving us with a sweeter, fuller, and deeper love than we have ever known. Trusting that you hear these prayers, and will respond according to your eternal purposes, we pray in the power of Jesus' name,

Amen.

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