

# One of Us

sermon digest

May 10, 2015

John 19:25-27

carolyn dipboye

Despite the attention paid to her over the centuries, we know amazingly little about her. As a matter of fact, the biblical account concerning her is, in the words of eminent Catholic theologian Jaroslav Pelikan, “tantalizingly brief” [*Mary through the Centuries*, 8]. She appears in Matthew’s and Luke’s stories of the birth of Jesus. She shows up along with Jesus’ brothers at five points in the Gospels’ accounts of Jesus’ ministry. John places her in his story about the wedding feast at Cana at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry and at the crucifixion. Acts places her with the innermost circle of believers gathered in the upper room in the days following Jesus’ death, resurrection and ascension. Yet in spite of the amazingly sparse biblical witness to her, Mary the mother of Jesus has played a highly significant role in the life of the church. Doctrine upon doctrine has evolved about her, and she has become a mainstay in popular religious expression. The 19<sup>th</sup> century constituted, in the words of Pelikan, a “golden age” for sightings of her; and even in the mid-20th century, more than 200 apparitions of Mary were reported within a 50 year period. Demonstrating the popular appeal these sightings enjoy, a reported appearance of Mary in a small Croatian village in 1981 saw 20 million pilgrims descending upon the village, in spite of the threat posed by land mines and sniper fire. Such was the significance of the sighting that it constituted, in the words of Croatia’s president, “the reawakening of the Croatian nation” [Pelikan, 3].

On the order of teachings about the Trinity, teachings about Mary and the role of Mary in the church have exceeded the mention of Mary and the role of Mary in scriptures. Over the centuries she has been hailed as the Second (as in the obedient) Eve; the Woman of Valor from Proverbs 31; and Theotokos (Mother of God), reflecting perhaps Elizabeth’s welcome of “the mother of my Lord.” She has served as both a uniter and a divider of the church. Just as her image has galvanized faith for masses of the faithful, it has become a line of division over which others will not pass. It was a sticking point between Protestants, Catholics and Eastern Orthodox as the ecumenical movement moved forward in the last century; and as biblical scholarship began to raise questions about the meaning of Mary’s virginity, they became a dividing point not unlike the point of division in the church over the teaching of evolution. Some in Protestant circles have accused their Catholic neighbors of “worshiping” Mary and in reaction have so minimized the role of Mary that she pales into insignificance. Indeed, an early church teaching about Mary insisted that Jesus passed through her as water through a straw. Contributing nothing to Jesus, she was nothing more than a convenient conduit through which Jesus entered the world.

**Mary was one of us.** We should make every effort not to claim more or less for Mary than the Bible claims. To idealize her and set her apart from the rest of humanity undercuts the important claim of Scripture that identifies Jesus with us exactly at the point that he, like us, was born of a woman (*Galatians 4:4*). To minimize Mary, on the other hand, as if her contribution is merely that of a passive by-stander, reduces her to little more than the inanimate figurine we move about in our Nativity scenes. As anyone who has ever been there knows, childbirth and child rearing are anything but passive.

Although we know little about Mary, we do have glimpses indicating she was an active participant in the unfolding story of faith. The Gospel of John goes so far as to place her at the foot of the cross. All of the Gospels place women at the crucifixion. The first three Gospels indicate the women watch from “afar” and list different names. Only John names Mary the mother of Jesus as being among the women and draws them close to the cross. Only he tells the story of Jesus placing Mary and the Beloved Disciple in one another’s care. It is a beautiful, touching scene, indicating perhaps the bond between mother and son, but probably more, the birth of the new community of faith in Jesus. Just as the (disobedient) Eve is depicted as the mother of all humanity, John may be citing Mary as the mother of the new family of believers. Perhaps he is trying to remedy a source of confusion among early believers—a source of confusion that seems to have been endemic in Mary herself. At five points, the Gospels share the story of Mary at a crossroads in life, seeking Jesus out, seemingly seeking to grasp the nature of her relationship to her adult son. John places her squarely within the community of faith. The place of Mary, John seems to be saying, the significance of Mary, is here among Jesus’ followers. She is one of us, seeking in faithfulness to follow her Lord.

**Rather than seeking to elevate Mary or tear her down, we would do well to seek rather to understand her significance in terms of what faithfulness bids us to be and do in our own day.** Commenting on the tendency within the church to identify Mary as the model of what a “true woman” should be, Jaroslav Pelikan observes somewhat ruefully that “it has become “a widely held historical

consensus that “the theology of the Virgin Mary has not altered women’s inferior status within the Church” [p. 3]. How sad. It seems that at the very least, our respect for the young peasant girl who became the mother of Jesus should compel us to respect women and insist on equal opportunity for women within the church as well as in society and the world into which we feel commissioned to go.

Some 40 years ago, respected musician/hymn writer Thomas Troeger penned the words “Our Savior’s Infant Cries Were Heard,” sung to the tune “Jesus, the Very Thought of Thee.” Affirming the human care Jesus received in his infancy, hymn affirms that “by trusting Christ to human care, God blessed forevermore the care of children every where—the bruised, the lost, the poor.” “Whoever,” the hymn continues, “calms a child by night or guides a youth by day, serves Him whose birth by lantern light was on a bed of hay.” The Christ, so lowly born, “is seeking now through us to be our children’s friend and Lord.”

If Troeger is right and in Jesus we are commissioned to the care of all children, I would suggest that through Mary and certainly through Jesus, we are commissioned to a special sensitivity to the alarming needs of women and children who surround us in our town, our state, our nation and world. Those engaged in rendering aid to people in crisis have long acknowledged the undeniable link between the well being of women and that of children.

We have come to recognize the all important 1000 day window of opportunity. If during the 1000 days between their conception and their second birthday children are not given the nurture they need, they and society will pay for it the rest of their lives. Bread for the World is focusing its offering of letters this year upon Maternal and Child Nutrition, recognizing that a malnourished mother cannot produce a healthy child. In countries most saddled with gender inequality, female family members are left to “eat least and last.” Those countries suffer high rates of undernutrition among women and girls as well as high infant mortality rates and the sad prominence of “stunting,” where children are rendered not just short, but tragically affected in terms of what they can achieve academically. Currently, one in three of children in developing countries—170 million children—are affected. If current trends continue, 450 million children will be afflicted in the next 15 years.

The problem is not just “over there.” It is also “right here.” Tennessee is rated as the 4<sup>th</sup> hungriest state in the nation. It is 13<sup>th</sup> in terms of having the highest poverty rate with more than one in four children living in poverty.

The numbers are so appalling that we tend to close off our ears and our hearts in order to gain some sense of well-being and peace. Should we not, however, be moved by the God who graced us through one little peasant girl and her son and see “the least of these” through the lens of compassion and hope? The challenges of motherhood are, of course, many. In honoring mothers today, however, might our attention be turned not just to mothers in situations like ours, but also to mothers in situations of want and violence throughout our community and across the world? Faithfulness to the God who came to us in Christ opens and empowers us to respond according to the fulness, the wideness, the abundance of the grace we have been given. It calls upon us to recognize our oneness with others in their need and to respond in grace.

Mary and her son, you see, *are* one with us; but we should also remember that Mary and her son are one with *them*.