

“Magnify The Good”

The Rev. Drew Willard
UCC at The Villages, FL
December 23rd, 2018
4th Sun. of Advent

Matthew 1:1-17

Luke 1:39-55

And Mary said,

*“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for [God] has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden. Luke 1:46-48*

Let us pray... O God,

Help us to read between the lines of the Bible to hear the voices
of those who might otherwise be missed.

Help us to magnify your glory by recognizing and caring for
those who are in ‘low estate’, yet highly regarded by you.

Help us to befriend our feminine side and our masculine side
to be more fully human and authentically who you created us to be.

Amen

Two summers ago, I had what I consider to be a revelation...

After a storytelling program I presented at a church where
several woman pastors were present, one of them asked me this:

“Here you are a man telling these Gospel stories about Jesus;
Can a woman tell them with conviction?”

I said ‘Yes, of course’,

but in the course of the summer I learned there were other stories
our woman pastors were telling from the Bible –
and that it was important to hear them and how women have been
involved all along, holding the story of God & humankind together...

So now you know there were five women listed in the genealogy of Jesus Christ
according to the Gospel of Matthew – but what do you suppose that means ?

In seminary, I was taught that it represented five times when
Jesus’ hereditary line was threatened – by five scandals...

Tamar was the daughter-in-law of Judah, and he was one of the 12 sons of Jacob,
and head-man of one of the original 12 tribes of Israel.

When her husband died, his brother was next to be obligated to marry her –
but then he died, too.

Not wanting to take another chance, Judah avoided giving her his next son.

Tamar realized if she didn’t act, she would lose her chance to have a child –
and preserve her status as a member of this powerful family.

After Judah’s wife passed on, Tamar put a plan into action:

She disguised herself as a prostitute and sat by a road that she knows
her father-in-law, Judah, will travel on.

Sure enough they get together and Judah promises to give her something in return;
and she asks him for a token, which he gives to her.

She became pregnant and 3 months later, she began to show...

Willard, p.2

When Judah learns of this, he calls for her to be executed for adultery...
until she brings out the token – “Remember this?”
at which point Judah acknowledges,
“You got me! You are more righteous than I am.”

Tamar saved herself and gave birth to twins
of whom her son Perez would carry on the hereditary line of Jesus.
Scandalous, or just shrewd?
She saved the day for God’s plan to continue to unfold
and so, the story continued...

Over the next five generations, the descendants of Abraham & Sarah
would leave the land of Canaan to escape famine and endure slavery in Egypt.
God would rescue them, leading them into the wilderness,
preparing them to return to Canaan now as people called the Hebrews.
They had become a great number of people –
and the Canaanites saw them as a threat.
The City of Jericho blocked their way, so the Hebrews sent 2 spies,
who had a clever idea... to stay at a brothel where men came and went...
incognito.

The brothel’s madam, **Rahab**, had heard about how the Hebrew’s God
had helped them against the Egyptians,
so she chose to hide the two spies and even lied to protect them.
In return, she got the spies to promise they would spare her loved ones,
They were true to their promise when the Hebrews crossed the Jordan
to capture Jericho and invade the land of Canaan.
The Hebrews established themselves there and a time of peace followed.
Rahab was honored and welcomed among them;
and a Hebrew man named Salmon took her to be his wife.

During this time of relative peace,
the Hebrew people flourished as an agrarian society called Israel.
Another famine forced the family of Naomi & Elimelek and their two sons
to emigrate to the land of the Moabites – future enemies of Israel.
However while they lived in Moab, their sons took foreign wives,
but not long afterwards, Elimelek died and so did his two sons.
Naomi decided to go back to Israel
and one of her Moabite daughters-in-law, **Ruth** , insisted on going with her.
Back among her own people,
Naomi decided she would fix Ruth up with one of her relatives, Boaz –
who was from a prominent family of the tribe of Judah.
Oh, and his parents were Salmon & Rahab!

Willard, p.3

Still, Ruth was a foreigner, but this didn't seem to matter to Boaz who had fallen in love with her, and so, they were married.

Perhaps, the scandal of miscegenation – interracial marriage was overlooked because Ruth & Boaz would be the great grandparents of King David.

It is believed the story of Ruth was written about 5 centuries later – upon the return of the people of Israel in 593 BCE from Babylonian captivity.

In the strict reinforcement of their laws to re-establish their culture – now as religious Jews, their leaders ordered that marriages to foreign wives were to be annulled and the women to be sent back to their homeland.

It is suggested that the Book of Ruth was written to protest against this terrible policy of breaking up families.

The **'wife of Uriah'** is not named, but we know it's Bathsheba – the woman with whom King David had an affair.

There had been a falling out with his principle wife among many wives & mistresses, and when he should have been out with his troops fighting the Ammonites, King David was lounging around the palace.

It so happened he was upstairs on the patio when he happened to glance next door as his neighbor's attractive wife just happened to be in the pool taking a bath.

One thing led to another, and they got to 'know' each other in the Biblical way', and Bathsheba became pregnant.

When David could not get Uriah to take time for some R&R or 'Rest & Recreation with Bathsheba, he had Uriah sent back to the front where he was abandoned in the heat of battle – and was killed.

King David then married Bathsheba and she had the child, but David was confronted by the Prophet Nathan with his crime.

David admitted his wrongdoing and Nathan told him his punishment would be that the child would be taken from him in death.

Such crises can destroy a relationship, yet in the midst of their grief, David & Bathsheba still loved each other and they had another child – Solomon, who would become a great king himself, and rule during a time of peace & prosperity.

So, it really was a scandal this time, but love prevailed to allow God's plan to continue.

25 generations later, the line would be threatened again – and broken, yet to achieve its purpose without falling into obscurity...

Mary the mother of Jesus was the 5th woman in Jesus' genealogy – who found herself in another potentially scandalous situation.

An angel of God, Gabriel, comes to announce to her that she is to be the mother of the Son of God.

Willard, p.4

According to Greek Orthodox tradition, Mary wasn't *commanded* to cooperate, but was invited to accept this honor and responsibility.

This is significant because it emphasizes that Christianity is not based on the mechanisms of coercion, but the dynamics of love.

The Greek Orthodox refer to Mary as the 'Theotokos' – the 'God-Bearer'...

In the Gospel of Matthew,

when her husband Joseph discovered that Mary was pregnant, he was scandalized by this and resolved to divorce her...

well, quietly, because... he still loved her,

and he didn't want any harm to come to her.

Society back then was probably no different from traditional societies even now where 'honor killings' can be expected for public displays of affection.

However, the Angel Gabriel paid another visit – this time to Joseph in a dream and explained that Mary was not kidding about what happened.

Joseph now realized that he had a role to play, too –

to help this baby come to term and to protect him.

It is as if the purpose of all those 'begats' of 42 generations came down to Joseph... *not touching* Mary.

So, it took those centuries of this relationship between God

and this particular group of people who went from being

nomads to Hebrews to Israelites to Jews

for *this* man to trust God – and do the right thing...

<http://holinesstoday.org/meet-five-unique-women-in-jesus-family-tree>

In the Gospel of Luke, Mary went to visit her Aunt Elizabeth –

shortly after she realized she was pregnant, and

she went presumably, with Joseph's knowledge and support.

It is upon their meeting that Elizabeth joyfully affirms what Mary had been told,

and then Mary spontaneously declares what has since been called

The Magnificat – from her opening words:

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

And what gets magnified is a young woman

who has a clear sense of purpose for her time.

We don't know her lineage. We don't know her education.

But we get a sense of why she was chosen for this task of being the God-Bearer.

She magnifies the nature of God as a God of justice and love –

characteristics that will be passed on to their Son...

We are seeing something else born here in our time, before our very eyes,

and we would do well to welcome it if we are wise...

Willard, p.5

When I was working as a recreation therapist

at Greystone Park State Psychiatric Hospital in upstate NJ,

I remember this one man on the co-ed second floor ward

who for years had been sitting by the nurse's table at one end of the day room.

He was a tall, angular black man, with unkempt hair and beard, sprinkled with grey.

If anybody spoke to him, he looked down with a shy gap-toothed smile.

He always wore the same jacket coat and no socks on his sandaled feet.

I don't think I ever heard him say anything.

One day, I got into a conversation with one of the nurses

about Mother Teresa.

I was so impressed by what I had learned about her and her story –

how she entered the slums of Calcutta with only 9 rupees in her pocket,

set up a mission in an abandoned temple,

to treat sick people with basic first aid

and to show God's love to dying people.

Referring to her courage – and the courage I daily saw in the women

who worked on the wards with me as nurses and caregivers, I said,

“Ya know, I think I need to be more like a woman!”

Now, you would think that might *not* be the best thing to say

on a psychiatric ward, and sure enough it got a reaction...

All of a sudden, that big, gentle man sitting there – who never said anything,

roared: “Hrrrrrrrrh!!!” He laughed !

And that was it!

Three days later he was discharged, never to return!

I guess he needed to say, “Yes!” to his feminine side – and be healed!

I think the world is learning – more and more,

to say, “Yes!” to its feminine side and be healed.

More and more, women are not waiting to be asked,

and they are finding their voice, speaking up,

interrupting and seeming to scandalize the Church's history –

or rather '*his* story' to claim their place in it, as examples for us all

The 14th Century CE Roman Catholic mystic named Meister Eckhart said,

"We are all meant to be mothers of God."

I think these days I prefer the term “Theotokos” – ‘God-Bearer’.

I could live with that – and I think we all could...

Amen

Wiullared, p.6

Not “feminine” at the exclusion of “masculine”, we need both,
wotking together to help build up the Beloved Community.

Here’s a hymn that comes from out of the Dark Ages that includes both...

"Of the Father's Love Begotten"

by Aurelius C. Prudentius, 413, cento Translated by John. M. Neale, 1818-1866 and Henry W. Baker, 1821-1977

*1. Of the Father's love begotten
Ere the worlds began to be,
He is Alpha and Omega,
He the Source, the Ending He,
Of the things that are, that have been,
And that future years shall see
Evermore and evermore.*

*2. Oh, that birth forever blessed
When the Virgin, full of grace,
By the Holy Ghost conceiving,
Bare the Savior of our race,
And the Babe, the world's Redeemer,
First revealed His sacred face
Evermore and evermore.*

*Our lesson today from Luke 1:39-55 includes Mary's prophetic words
about God's work that will be accomplished
through the child she will bring into the world...*

39 In those days Mary arose
and went with haste into the hill country, to a city of Judah,
40 and she entered the house of Zechari'ah and greeted Elizabeth.
41 And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary,
the babe leaped in her womb;
and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit
42 and she exclaimed with a loud cry,
"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!
43 And why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord
should come to me?
44 For behold, when the voice of your greeting came to my ears,
the babe in my womb leaped for joy.
45 And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment
of what was spoken to her from the Lord."
46 And Mary said,
"My soul magnifies the Lord,
47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
48 for [God] has regarded
the low estate of his handmaiden.
For behold, henceforth
all generations will call me blessed;
49 for [God] who is mighty
has done great things for me, and holy is [God's] name.
50 And his mercy is on those who fear him
from generation to generation.
51 [God] has shown strength
with his arm,
[God] has scattered the proud
in the imagination of their hearts,
52 [God] has put down the mighty
from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree;
53 [God] has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent empty away.
54 [God] has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,
55 as [God] spoke to our [ancestors],
Abraham [& Sarah] and to [their] posterity for ever."

Our lesson from Matthew 1:1-17...

¹The book of the genealogy of

Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

²Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob,
and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers,

³and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Ta-mar',

and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Ram,

⁴and Ram the father of Ammin'adab, and Ammin'adab the father of Nahshon,
and Nahshon the father of Salmon,

⁵and Salmon the father of Bo'az by Rahab [Ray'-hab],

and Bo'az the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse,

⁶and Jesse the father of David the king.

And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uri'ah,

⁷and Solomon the father of Rehobo'am, and Rehobo'am the father of Abi'jah,
and Abi'jah the father of Asa,

⁸and Asa the father of Jehosh'aphat, and Jehosh'aphat the father of Joram,
and Joram the father of Uzzi'ah,

⁹and Uzzi'ah the father of Jotham,

and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezeki'ah,

¹⁰and Hezeki'ah the father of Manas'seh, and Manas'seh the father of Amos,
and Amos the father of Josi'ah,

¹¹and Josi'ah the father of Jechoni'ah and his brothers,
at the time of the deportation to Babylon.

¹²And after the deportation to Babylon:

Jechoni'ah was the father of She-al'ti-el,

and She-al'ti-el the father of Zerub'babel,

¹³and Zerub'babel the father of Abi'ud, and Abi'ud the father of Eli'akim,
and Eli'akim the father of Azor,

¹⁴and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim,
and Achim the father of Eli'ud,

¹⁵and Eli'ud the father of Elea'zar, and Elea'zar the father of Matthan,
and Matthan the father of Jacob,

¹⁶and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary,
of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ.

¹⁷So all the generations from Abraham to David were fourteen generations,
and from David to the deportation to Babylon fourteen generations,

and from the deportation to Babylon to the Christ fourteen generations.