

“There’s Something About Mary”
UU Church of Arlington
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Sermon

A few weeks ago, during our Easter service, I talked about the story in the book of Matthew that ends with the two Marys staring into the depths of the empty tomb in which Jesus had been buried. Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Mary, the lover of Jesus. And my goodness, what a reaction that provoked. “Did you really say that?” Any number of people asked. “Was Mary really Jesus’ lover?”

For a religious community that most of the time pays little attention to the Christian scriptures, I found this response remarkable! What was being triggered here? I don’t know if it was the idea that Jesus had a lover that made people wonder or was it talking that way about Mary? Were people defensive of Mary or had the narrative about Mary being a prostitute just been turned on its ear? I’m not sure. But somehow Mary captures attention in a way that goes beyond the Christian story. Even in the larger culture there’s a movie or book that features Mary that comes out regularly and creates a stir. Like the DaVinci Code which “uncovered” the secret that Mary had Jesus’ child. Like the movie Mary Magdalene that just came out last month which portrays Mary as the most spiritually reflective of Jesus’ apostles and certainly not a prostitute.

Now, I must admit, I really don’t know if Mary was Jesus’ lover. And I must admit I said it knowing it would be a bit inflammatory. But I like to talk about the Christian stories as real life stories. I do believe that Jesus was a real person that offered great spiritual wisdom. And, if you really look at the stories, I think Jesus was a feminist. There are a number of stories about him honoring the spiritual work of women. Many people don’t know that the Bible as we know it now is a collection of stories about Jesus written over the course of years and pieced together by church hierarchies. There’s not even “one bible” today but many versions

depending upon the denomination and even many versions within the same denominations! So it's rather odd that with all these different texts that we use the word "Gospel" to mean the solid truth.

There were even other Gospel stories told and written down after Jesus' death that were hidden for many centuries, including a Gospel of Mary. The Gospel of Mary was really quite radical: There is no hell and no eternal punishment in the teachings, for God is not conceived as a wrathful ruler or judge, but is called simply the Good. Nor is God called Father; for gender, sexuality, and the social roles ascribed to them are part of the lower material realm. Even the true spiritual nature of human beings is non-gendered, so that people are truly neither male nor female, but simply human in accordance with the divine image of the transcendent good. Moral effort is centered on inner spiritual transformation, not on sin and judgment. Sounds like Mary was a Unitarian Universalist!

These radical ideas were set aside by the church patriarchy and by the fifth century this deeply spiritual and noble woman named Mary of Magdala was declared to be a prostitute and rendered as a foil against the virgin mother Mary. Thus we have the two primary models of womanhood in the Christian world set through the ages. Women can be either virgins or whores, or married with the express duty of bearing children. There were church patriarchs like Augustine who believed that women were inherently stupid because they had something getting in the way of their brain working. He believed, and this is a true story, that the womb was something that floated around in woman's bodies and from time to time would get stuck near their brain and cause it to malfunction. Hmmm. Tertullian, another gem of a church father, said "The judgment of God upon your sex endures even today; and with it inevitably endures your positions as criminal at the bar of justice. You are the gateway of the Devil."

And yet there has always been an undercurrent in Christianity that gave women something to hold onto: Mary. Mary the virgin mother. Mary that was sung about so beautifully this morning. Mary, the serene, divine

feminine. Even with the impossible role of virgin mother, at least women could relate to her pain and suffering and ultimate love.

All this makes me incredibly sad because none of this was what Jesus taught or encouraged or even implied. Actually the opposite. What Augustine thought then and what evangelicals preach now is not Christianity. It is *their version* of Christianity: twisted and deformed and reformed into a set of rules and judgements that have no resemblance to Jesus' thought or word.

In recent weeks we have seen this resurgence: a revisionist bastardization of Christian thought that is really more about white Christian male supremacy than any thing else. This controversy about abortion is not really about abortion. It's about finding a way to control women. Especially to control women of color as they are the ones who have the least support for unwanted pregnancies and highest chance of dying in childbirth.

I could go on and on about this, so I will try to limit myself. But this needs to be talked about because we are ceding the public conversation to these twisters of the truth. We have been caught sleeping and have let something we thought almost dead resurrect itself in the ugliest of ways. And let me be clear, I honor that people can have moral questions about abortion. But, as I said, I don't believe this is really about abortion.

Some of you saw me post this on Facebook and I think it bears repeating. People mistakenly reported this as something Gloria Steinem said but it was someone else: "How about we treat every young man who wants to buy a gun like every woman who wants to get an abortion - mandatory 48-hour waiting period, parental permission, a note from his doctor proving he understands what he's about to do, a video he has to watch about the effects of gun violence.... Let's close down all but one gun shop in every state and make him travel hundreds of miles, take time off work, and stay overnight in a strange town to get a gun. Make him walk through a gauntlet of people who are holding photos of loved ones who were shot to death, people who call him a murderer and beg him not to buy a gun."

I actually wish this were the case. But given that we cannot even imagine it being something any legislature would ever even consider makes the point: this latest spate of hateful legislation is about controlling women and creating shame. I just read something I didn't know: that evangelicals didn't take up against abortion until the 1970s. Originally they were rising up to protect the right of Bob Jones University to exclude people of color. While they were organizing around this racist agenda they thought they might want to expand their agenda to cover over this base attempt and seized on abortion as a way to do that.

The sad consequence of this is that the roughly one third of women in this country who have had abortions have been taught to feel shame and to fear being honest about one of the most difficult decisions of their lives. And other women who are facing the decision about what to do about a pregnancy that could devastate their lives have no idea of the sisterhood they could turn to. Because even we who are liberal don't talk about it. We have stopped seeing abortion as a moral choice because that makes it too complicated. It is a moral choice. It is about what women choose to do when faced with an unplanned, unwanted, or medically compromised pregnancy. Moral choices are complex, deeply personal, and yet deeply impactful on the lives of everyone around them. And to require women to justify themselves in a simplistic, 'right or wrong' way, is to deliberately misunderstand and demean women's ability to struggle with their own moral choices.

Okay, I will take a breath here. In the midst of my quite obvious outrage at what is happening now, it was incredibly helpful to gather with a number of religious leaders of all denominations and traditions to talk about how we can communicate a different kind of moral message today. Because what we collectively affirmed is that the real moral issues before us are to confront the kind of moralistic white supremacy that has for centuries judged people of color to be inherently sinful, that holds up women as the gateway to sin, that insists they are speaking about life when they refuse to help make it a life worth living for those in poverty without adequate health care. To be among people who understand this is not a white women's issue, nor just a woman's issue. It is about men

who father children, it is about trans women and men who are forced into a dichotomous and rigid gender expression.

So it cheers me to see a strain of Christian thought today that is the opposite of this. Nadia Bolz Weber is a Lutheran pastor who is the opposite of what you imagine when you think Lutheran pastor: she's 6'1" and covered with tattoos which get showed off regularly since she never wears anything but sleeveless shirts with a minister's collar. And she curses more than I do, which I didn't think possible.

Bolz-Weber started a church in Denver called the "Church for Sinners and Saints" which caters to people in recovery and LGBTQI people. When she talks about the traditional churches' attitudes toward sexuality, she uses the metaphor of the circular agriculture field. You know those green circles that you see when you look down from an airplane? They're not planted that way. Instead they get that way because of circular sprinklers: the green part is what gets watered by a circular sprinkler.

So she says that what Christian doctrine over the years has done is give nourishment, honor and praise, only to a very small select circle of people that exemplify the purity standards of no sex until marriage, and of course straight heterosexual people. She says "Our purity systems, even those established with the best of intentions, do not make us holy. They only create insiders and outsiders. They are mechanisms for delivering our drug of choice: self-righteousness, as juice from the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil runs down our chins. Purity most often leads to pride or to despair, not to holiness. Because holiness is about union with, and purity is about separation from. Dignity, the quality or state of being worthy, comes from our origin, not from our efforts." [from *Shameless: a Sexual Reformation*]

She became outraged at the statement that came out last year from the prominent evangelical preachers called the Nashville Statement. So outraged that she decided with a group from her congregation to rewrite it. Here's just a sample:

(NASHVILLE) WE AFFIRM that Christ Jesus has come into the world to save sinners and that through Christ's death and resurrection forgiveness

of sins and eternal life are available to every person who repents of sin and trusts in Christ alone as Savior, Lord, and supreme treasure. WE DENY that the Lord's arm is too short to save or that any sinner is beyond his reach. (DENVER) WE AFFIRM that Christ Jesus has come into the world to save sinners and that through Christ's death and resurrection forgiveness of sins and eternal life are available to every person; this is a supreme treasure. WE DENY that God is a boy and has actual arms.

And now we come back full circle to Mary. We need Mary, the Mary of the Gospel of Mary: "Do not weep, and do not grieve nor be afraid, for his grace will be with you completely, and will protect you. But rather let us praise his greatness, for he has prepared us, and has turned us into human beings." Human beings that are ALL worthy. Each and every one of us. Worthy in mind, body and spirit. Worthy of being entrusted to have agency over ourselves. All of us created in the divine image of God.

So may we live and find our being.

Amen.

Benediction

Hildegard of Bingen

The soul is kissed by God

In its innermost regions.

With interior yearning,

Grace and blessing are bestowed.

It is a yearning to take on God's gentle yoke,

It is a yearning to give one's self to God's way.