

Sermon 050816 Mother's Day
Scripture: Luke 1: 46-55
Sermon Title: Hail Mary; Full of Grace

I was raised a Roman Catholic and have some family and friends who are somewhat puzzled my current career choice. They still love me, but have questions. There are questions like, "What should I call you?" "Not Father" is always part of my response. Another question is, "What is the difference between Catholic and Protestant?" Now, that one can be answered many ways, most of them complicated, tricky, and potentially disagreeable. I usually go to real life issues like, I can marry and there are female Protestant ministers. I avoid theological answers. There is an aspect, however, that I've never mentioned but often think of as a difference that I actually think that I am closer to Catholic than Protestant on. It regards Mary, the mother of Jesus.

As, Protestants, we focus our love and faith and devotion on Jesus Christ. Catholics spread their devotion around; including various saints that they use as sort of intermediaries to God. The one for Catholics that is above all others is Mary. I've always had the impression that Mary is a Catholic, even though she was in fact, Jewish.

Now, in lucid moments, I agree that Jesus is our Lord and Savior and that is where our faith should be focused. I think, however, we miss out if we ignore Mary. I don't pray to her, but

her story is tragic but rich. We can learn from her. She is an inspiration and an example of devoted and holy motherhood.

This is something that I get to do as a minister. I have my own ministry. Nobody in the history of Christian clergy has had a ministry quite like the one I'm living. I'm not saying that my ministry will be better or worse than anyone else's. I get to minister in the way that I perceive will be my best way to serve God. Therefore, I can be a Protestant minister who preaches on Mary. Mother's Day is when I choose to give my first sermon on Mary.

One of the compelling parts of Mary's story is that she had the great tragedy of having one of her offspring die. We have mothers in our church who have endured the same tragedy so I thought the time was right.

I would like to recognize the Moms in the congregation. Happy Mother's Day! Mary is the prime example, but you have all given of yourselves in ways that are beyond the scope of those of us who will never experience what you do. I'd also like to recognize the women who for whatever reasons never had the experience of motherhood. Not having children might be the only thing that is more painful than having children. Mother's Day is possibly a less than joyful day for you. But remember this, having children or not having children does not make one a success or a

failure. We are all children of God. We should never confuse parenthood with personhood. Parents and non-parents alike may or may not live full, faithful and rewarding lives like everyone else. I say this as a man who has never been a Dad.

I would like to speak briefly of a few of the mother's in my life. My own sainted Mom was all I could hope for and more. She was a wonderful Mom despite great loss that I didn't learn of until after her death. She was the model of unqualified love who gave me among, so much more, a love of books and an eclectic tastes in music. When I was a teenager, I had a surrogate mother named Shirley, who opened her heart and home to me when I was a senior in high school. Shirley gave me some much needed tough but tender love that came at the exact right time in my life.

I can't give this Mother's Day sermon without mentioning my Aunt Corinne. She gave birth to two children. The first, my cousin Jeanne, is one of the finest people that I've ever known. Her second born was Chris, known to those of us who love him as Bucky, who was born with Muscular Dystrophy. He was never able to walk and had some, but little use of his upper extremities. The previous record of survival was 7 years old in Buckeye's particular form of MD. Bucky lived to be 26, largely because of his own extraordinary drive and strength. But Aunt Corinne's overwhelming love, devotion, and hard work that included picking

him up and putting him on the toilet whenever necessary inspired him and kept him vital and alive, and all the while she was loving wife to Uncle Dick and raising their wonderful daughter Jeanne. Aunt Corinne gets Olympic gold for mothering.

Motherhood is an amazing thing. I'm not a Dad, which has its own sadness, but I get to witness Meg as a Mom. But to see and listen to how she loved, supported, and challenged her two teenage children was amazing and it continues now that they are in their twenties. It is evident in who her children have become as adults. Motherhood has its joys as well as its challenges, of course. When we got married and I moved in, Meg had a very bright and highly spirited 15 year old daughter, Liz. Liz was a load to say the least. Meg had, truth be known, at times mused at the notion of selling Liz into slavery. Charlie, Liz's older brother by two years, being ever helpful, came to Meg and said, "Mom, I checked EBay and the most we can get is only 8 bucks for Liz!" Meg said after getting off the phone with Liz at one point that the 8 bucks is starting to sound pretty good. Sometimes laughter is the best solution to teenagers. Liz, by the way, is long past that stage and is a terrific young professional woman these days.

One of the greatest and most famous works of art in history is Michelangelo's incredible marble sculpture called the Pieta. It is a depiction of the deceased Jesus lying in the arms of his mother,

Mary. Interestingly, there is no biblical account of this scene actually taking place. It is an example of art depicting truth but not necessarily fact. I've had the extraordinary experience of seeing the Pieta in St. Peter's Cathedral in the Vatican. Sadly, it is pushed in a corner and surrounded by bulletproof glass because of a madman's attack. Despite all that, the experience of being in its presence is deeply spiritual. The realism, the glory, the power of the sculpture could not be lost even on the most ardent atheist. What you experience is not just the unspeakable tragedy of the death of Jesus, but the absorbing of his suffering by his mother. That is what motherhood seems to be about. To actually feel the hurt, the happiness, the victories, the defeats of your children. Mary had what has to be the worst experience in life; a parent witnessing the death of her own child.

Mother love is like no other love. Thank God for mother love. It is about support, forgiveness, gentleness, patience. It is the little things; the giving of oneself whether to clean up a spill, kiss a boo-boo, or checking for ghosts under the bed. It is rooted in love deep in the fiber of one's being. It makes the passages: the prom, the leaving for college, the moving out, and the wedding even more profound for mother than child. The capacity to absorb the pain and suffering of a child as is captured in the Pieta. This

trait is not in the sole possession of mothers, but it is surely a visible trait of motherhood.

When I think of Mary, I think of God choosing us, humans, to participate in, to redeem, to love and to save. I think of God picking a marginalized female. God chose Mary, a peasant girl, as the bearer of God's grace. Grace is not earned, it is bestowed. God bestowed Mary with grace and thereby bestowed all of us with grace. Because a simple, marginalized girl took on the awesome responsibilities of mother of God on earth, all of us have the opportunity to experience salvation. If God could do such a great thing with Mary, what can God do with us?

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee; blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. AMEN