

“Giving Birth to God’s Presence in the World”

John 2 and Acts 9:32 - 43

May 10, 2020

Happy Mother’s Day. Here is a grown-up child’s message to his mother:

“When you thought I wasn’t looking, I saw you hang my first painting on the refrigerator, and I wanted to paint another one.

When you thought I wasn’t looking, I saw you feed a stray dog and I thought it was good to be kind to animals.

When you thought I wasn’t looking, I saw you make my favorite cake just for me, and I knew that little things are special things.

When you thought I wasn’t looking, I heard you say a prayer, and I believed there is a God I could always talk to.

When you thought I wasn’t looking, I felt you kiss me good night, and I felt loved.

When you thought I wasn’t looking, I saw tears come from your eyes, and I learned that sometimes things hurt, but it’s alright to cry.

When you thought I wasn’t looking, I saw that you cared and I wanted to be everything that I could be.

When you thought I wasn’t looking, I looked... and wanted to say thanks for all the things I saw when you thought I wasn’t looking.”

Today is a day to give thanks to all our mothers. Some years ago, a woman in my church shared with me that she dreaded going to church on Mother's Day. I gently asked why. "Because", she explained, "I was never able to have children and worship on Mother's Day just never seems relevant to me." Celebrating mothers doesn't have to be about thanking only our biological moms, but thanking all the women in our lives who have helped to shape who we are today.

Meister Eckhart, a 13th century German priest and spiritual director, very wisely taught and preached: "We are all meant to be mothers of God, giving birth to God's Spirit in the world." In all we say and do, God calls us to be mothers of God, giving birth to God's Spirit in the world.

This morning I want to consider two women of the Bible who gave birth to God's presence in the world and who have something to teach us about what it means to be children of God and disciples of Jesus Christ. Two women who have helped to shape my life.

Prayer for Understanding.

First, Mary.

She literally gives birth to God's presence in the world by becoming the mother of Jesus. However, in John's gospel, she is not introduced to us at Jesus' birth. We meet her for the first time after Jesus has grown into adulthood, at a wedding in the small town

of Cana, located about 10 miles north of Jesus' hometown of Nazareth. Cana is an ordinary town, so ordinary that it is not mentioned anywhere else in the New Testament.

Let's listen to how John describes the opening occasion of Jesus' ministry.

Read John 2

The setting is a wedding. Weddings typically lasted about 7 days during Jesus' day. It's no wonder, given the fact that the guests probably had to arrive by foot. It's the middle of that week of celebration when an impending crisis occurs. The wine gives out. Nothing will spoil a good party in first century Galilee like the wine giving out! Mary notices the impending crisis and calls Jesus' attention to the problem. Jesus' response is "Woman, what concern is it of yours or mine?" After all, they are guests and not directly responsible for the problem. What I love about Mary is that she makes it her problem. Perhaps believing that whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. We all have a choice from time to time, to either keep quiet about a problem, or we can speak up and call attention to the problem which threatens to undo the fabric of community and do something about it. Mary chooses to speak up. And she takes the problem to Jesus. She is probably the first person to understand that Jesus has the power to make things right. She trusts Jesus. And she refuses to accept "no" for an answer.

Mary calls aside a servant and instructs the servant to take the jugs of water to Jesus and do whatever Jesus commands. I think we all have a responsibility to bring to Jesus, in prayer, all that threatens our life together. And then to let it go, trusting Jesus to do what needs to be done. Jesus' response: he changes the water into wine; he transforms the crisis of emptiness into a gift of abundance.

I love this story because sometimes we tend to focus on the miracle itself. But the miracle occurs through a relationship of love, trust, generosity and faith between a mother and Jesus. It is that relationship which transforms a crisis into a celebration.

Mary, confident in her relationship with Jesus, brought a concern, not just for herself and her family, but for the community before Jesus and he responded. Mary had faith and trusted Jesus to resolve the crisis.

The second woman's story is wedged between two well known stories in the New Testament book of Acts. The first story, on the one end, is a recounting of Paul's conversion from being a persecutor of the Christians to a missionary for Christ as he is traveling on the road to Damascus. Paul, as we know, becomes a great preacher, establishing churches from Jerusalem to Rome.

The second story is the longest single narrative in the book of Acts. It describes the conversion of Cornelius, a Gentile soldier, when Peter visits his home. It is a significant story which will impact the direction which the early church will take. Both of these stories – the conversion of Paul and the witness of the gospel to the Gentiles – have significant, significant impact on the Christian missionary effort.

And wedged in between these two familiar stories is the story of Tabitha. Why did the writer of Acts insert this story? Is the writer trying to tell us that the little acts of kindness we experience each day by people who are little known set us up for the big stuff? Tabitha is the only woman in the New Testament who is called a disciple, using the feminine form of the Greek word for disciple. Let's listen to her story.

Read Acts 9: 32-43

This story of Tabitha both echoes stories in the life of Jesus – do you remember how Jesus raised Jairus’ daughter from the dead in the Gospel of Luke. It serves as a bridge of sorts between the life of Jesus and the ministry of his disciples in his name. It is one more story about new life occurring in the midst of death- of God’s Spirit being born anew in the world – a world where common fishermen are preaching to temple authorities, paralyzed old men get up and walk and a widow is dispensing charity to the poor. It is a story about how God will use the lowly and despised in the world to bring about a new way of being.

Who was Tabitha? We are told she is a widow. Without children or next of kin to support them, widows were often the recipients of the Temple treasury. But Tabitha doesn’t fit that mold. Instead of being a recipient of charity; she is the head of a charitable non-profit organization in her community. “She was devoted to good works and acts of charity.” She did not allow her circumstances to shape who she was, rather she inserted herself into her circumstances in life giving ways. What she did was to provide the widows of the community clothing and coats. These tunics became a symbol of Tabitha’s creative love.

Tabitha dies and the community sends for Peter. Peter responds to their request, is willing to go out of his way, to be interrupted, to visit a community of widows. After arriving on the scene Peter speaks a prophetic word of new life into this desperate, lifeless situation: “Rise – get up” and nothing is ever quite the same. Tabitha is saved by Peter’s bold word and his solidarity. Tabitha may be a little-known person to us today, but without her generosity and faithfulness, the story of Acts might not have unfolded in

the way it did. She was the hinge for God to do amazing things within and through the early Christian community.

Today is a day when we remember those special women in our lives; people who have taught us what it means to be followers of Jesus Christ. When you thought we weren't looking, we heard, we saw, we experienced, and you have shaped who we are. Women who have had courage to give out of their poverty, to love the unlovable, to see hope where there appears to be none. Women who have walked in the footsteps of Mary and Tabitha and have been the smallest of hinges for the big stuff which happens in our lives. Women in whom we have seen the face of Jesus. Women who have taught us what it means to give birth to God's Spirit in our world.

Happy Mother's Day.