



The Unitarian Church in Westport

SERMON TRANSCRIPT:

Which Mary?

By Rev. Dr. John Morehouse

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In Susan Monk Kid's novel, [The Secret Life of Bees](#), the heroine, a girl named Lily, loses her mother and attempts to escape the brutality of her father. Lily is raised by Rosaleen, her proud and outspoken African-American nanny. In the summer of 1964, when Rosaleen attempts to exercise her newly-won right to vote, she is attacked by the three worst racists in town and is thrown into jail. Lily is determined to save Rosaleen and finally escapes her own father as well. Seizing the moment, she springs Rosaleen from jail, and the two set out across South Carolina in search of a new life. Their destination is Tiburon, South Carolina—a town they know nothing about except that in a box of Lily's mother's belongings there is a cryptic picture of a black Virgin Mary with the words "Tiburon, South Carolina" written on the back. There they are taken in by three black beekeeping sisters who worship the Black Madonna. It is here, surrounded by the strength of the Madonna, the hum of bees, and a circle of wise and quite colorful women, that Lily makes her passage to wholeness and a new life. (Wikipedia)

For millennia, ever since the destruction of the Ancient goddess cults, the Madonna, Mary, mother of Jesus, has been a stealth goddess to whom women and many men turn for solace and support, escaping the wrath and condemnation of God the Father and even Jesus, his Son. What is much less known is the constellation of feminine divinity which resides with all the women named Mary in the bible. Besides Mary the mother, is Mary the Magdalene, Jesus' closest disciple and some say wife, who up until 1969 was officially portrayed by the Catholic Church as a prostitute. As we shall see, she was anything but that. There was Mary the sister of Martha, who in the Gospel of John, is portrayed as the anti-thesis to the uptight and man-serving Martha, more in touch it seems with the true spiritual nature of feminine power. Then there is the woman by the well, who is clearly suffering from a sort of sexual persecution and has been labeled as a "loose woman" in the deeply patriarchal society in which Jesus lived. She too, scholars suggest, might have been a Mary.

Why is it that the Bible names so many of the female characters Mary, imbuing them with characteristics that range from a virgin mother to a harlot? The answer, I believe, resides in the difficulty the patriarchal society of early Judaism had with including the reality of

women in its codex. Women, whether disciples or characters with whom Jesus interacted with, were a part of the story that made his message as truly revolutionary as it really is: the first shall be last and the last shall be first. Wouldn't it be a foregone conclusion that women were a significant part of his following? And wouldn't their intuitive and organic understanding of God be a part of what Jesus preached?

Will the real Mary please stand up? Who was Mary and why is she so mysterious? Why do we conflate these women? And why does orthodoxy either de-sexualize them, as in making Jesus' mother a virgin, or make them prostitutes?

I am talking about this on Mother's Day for several reasons. First of all, as we learned about Julia Ward Howe, women are indeed the makers of our future despite the odds against them. But secondly and more important, each of these Marys represent what I see as essential gifts in mothering. Yes, Mother Mary is the woman who gives birth to Jesus but in so doing she has demonstrated the grit and determination to bring a soul into the world regardless of who that soul becomes. Mother Mary is too often portrayed as a passive actor in the nativity story, but she is anything but. Yes, she agrees to the annunciation, but she then carries on despite what must have been ridicule by the society around her: an unmarried peasant woman with an older man (likely Joseph was her uncle), giving birth in desperate circumstances and then, as if that weren't hard enough, raising Jesus who by all accounts was a difficult and irrepressible troublemaker. He even denounces her at one point, in the Gospel of Matthew "Look, your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you." 48. But Jesus replied, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" 49 Pointing to His disciples, He said, "Here are my mother and my brothers.... "Who is my mother, who are my brothers?" Any parent who has had that pain of rejection knows how tender this is. To be a parent, to mother into being, physically or not, is a testament to the human will.

And lastly, Mary the Magdalene mothered an entire movement, indeed, an ethos of love and radical acceptance despite the condemnation of her male associates, the so-called disciples. Mary Magdalene represents for us the creative power which, when coupled with the grit, of her and Mother Mary's life stories, can only point us to the power mothering has for any of us. It's not so much a peon to mothers I am about today, but a tribute to the process of mothering in its myriad of forms.

The story of the Marys of the Bible contains yet deeper truths. I won't say it is true - what about the Bible can we say is true in a factual sense - but I will say that the archeological and scriptural evidence is significant. Let me start by saying that there is a good chance Jesus did not die on a cross. And there is a possibility that the Marys in his life saved him.

Clearly, he was involved with very influential women in his life. The first was Mary his mother. If you read the gospels carefully you will see that she is often nearby. Once, in frustration, he tries to disavow her but for the most part, she is part of his ministry. It is quite possible that she and her family were an advance team going ahead of Jesus and his male disciples and making arrangements for his preaching and healing in the next town. She was there when he was crucified. She took his body off the cross. And she likely had a partner, Mary the Magdalene. I call her "Mary the Magdalene" because Magdalene was her title, not her last name. Magdalene was a Jewish branch of the house of David and it was quite likely that she was a proto-princess. There is little doubt that she was wealthy, but not from prostitution. And there is a great deal of evidence that she was partnered to Jesus. The assumption that Jesus was celibate and single not only doesn't fit some of the later gospels but would have made no sense as a man in Jewish society.

The wedding feast at Cana as told in the gospel of John provides a glimpse into this possibility. If you remember, Jesus and his disciples were attending a wedding feast in Cana when the party ran out of wine. "Jesus' mother told Jesus, "They have no wine," and Jesus replied, "O Woman, what have I to do with you? My hour has not yet come." His mother then said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you" (John 2:3-5). Jesus ordered the servants to fill containers with water and to draw out some and take it to the chief steward waiter. After tasting it, and not knowing where it came from, the steward congratulated the bridegroom on departing from the custom of serving the best wine first by serving it last (John 2:6-10)."

The question is, why is Jesus giving orders at someone else's wedding? According to Jewish custom the groom is responsible for providing the wine. Is it possible that this is Jesus' own wedding? The real miracle may not be turning water into wine, but that Jesus was married after all to his "beloved disciple", not John but Mary the Magdalene. Is this the reason that the church portrayed her as a whore in order to disassociate her from Jesus as his wife, a most earthly relationship that might suggest his divinity is in question? Was the real power in his relationship to the creative power of Mary Magdalene? After all it was Mary Magdalene who was the first to witness Jesus risen after the crucifixion "My rabbi, my lord, my beloved" in some translations from the Aramaic.

There is some evidence that Jesus survived the crucifixion and left Galilee all together with his mother Mary and his wife Mary, eventually ending up in Southern France as Gnostic Christians claim (see Sylvia Brown's Two Marys). The fact that there are so many later references to Southern France and Northern Spain indicate that this is, at least, a possibility. After all, the Knights Templar, an ancient mystical church order dedicated to protecting the chalice and pilgrims going to Jerusalem, had a major presence in Toulouse

along with another group the Cather's. Could the real chalice be, as Dan Brown and others have suggested, not a cup but Mary the Magdalene's womb?

Whatever the factual truth is we will never really know. But then we will never really know about the teaching of Jesus save through the lens of gospel writers who lived generations after he did.

What we do know is that the Marys represent a pervasive feminine spiritual presence in the story of Christianity and indeed our own lives: the creative power of the Divine Feminine in the mothering narrative is the real story. Like the black Madonna in The Secret Life of Bees, there is a sort of divine stickiness to the power of women. That these Marys, these mothers, are in this story is that stickiness still.

What we do know is that Mary the mother of Jesus was absolutely devoted to her son and his ministry; that she herself had knowledge of healings and herbs; and that she was the embodiment of so much Sophia or wisdom -- itself an ancient idea that that what is truly wise resides in the mystery of the divine feminine. Think about it: where would a Jewish man get the idea that the first shall be last and the last shall be first? Where would an itinerant preacher who had no standing on his own, learn to heal the sick and give comfort to the downfallen? Where would even the Messiah stoop down, write in the sand and answer the angry men who wanted to stone an adulterous to death: "he who is without sin, cast the first stone"? Where but through the women in his life, starting with his mother? Not just any mother, but a Jewish mother.

What we do know is that Jesus loved Mary the Magdalene most of all. Although the women in the story are conflated into virgins and harlots, was it not Mary who cleaned his feet with her hair and perfume before he was crucified? Was it not Mary who Jesus defended to the male disciples as doing God work and not their constant doubting? Was it not Mary the Magdalene who the gospels are really referring to and not John, painted as a woman in Da Vinci's last supper? And would not a powerful and wealthy woman in her own right have taught her husband to stand up for what he believes in? While Mary his mother imparted wisdom and healing, Mary his wife gave him courage. Isn't this the best of the women, and those who have been mother to us in our own lives?

What we do know is Jesus and all compassionate men have been taught and cared for by strong and compassionate women; they who embody the goddess. The goddess is not just for women, but for men who can learn from the power of intuition, powerful, if not always predictable, emotions, and the courage to stand for what is right.

Of course, today our hearts ache for Mike and Trina whose son Bryce died unexpectedly last week. Where is the creative power in such a tremendous loss? What of the love of a mother and a father who placed so much love and creativity in a child? Where is power there? In, just perhaps, the collective knowledge that each life lived is never wasted, even if cut from our midst in moments far too soon. That Bryce lived among us, that he loved and gave his gifts, for that we will always be richer for. The creative power of a life never dies just as the good never dies.

The power of the presence of these two mothers and those who mother everywhere cannot be denied and deserves a deeper appreciation.

As the gospel of Phillip puts it, “they were the women who walked with the Lord” and walk with us now. If we have eyes to see. Who is the Mary in your life? Who has mothered you?

Amen.