



First Congregational Church of Ashfield ❖ United Church of Christ
Creating Community, Welcoming All

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Rev. David Jones, Minister

Sunday, May 8, 2022 “Strange Families” Rev. David Jones

I want to thank our choir, on Choir Sunday, for this remarkable anthem. It was because of this anthem that I finally settled on our scriptures for this morning. I love Mary’s song when we hear it in Advent and on Christmas Eve, but with things converging as they did, I thought we could hear it today in the season of Easter as well.

For Christians, we are reminded in the season of Easter that every Sunday marks not only a new week but a new Creation. It is the start of a new Way, the beginning of a revolution that will grow and kick not in the shadow of the cross, but in the furtive dark of an empty tomb. All things become possible. This is what Mary is singing about, and what Jesus will teach: the kin-dom of God is among us. It is here and now.

Mary is sometimes called ‘the bearer of God’ for this reason. She re-instigates the revolution that God made when God formed the seas and the earth, formed brilliant stars in the sky and wildflowers in the fields. By being set free from the grip of death, we will make our way to the equality and balance and harmony of that garden we were given to.

Mary is specific about what the process of this returning will look like: she describes how the lowly will be lifted and the mighty brought low; she says, echoing her ancestor Hannah, that the hungry will be filled and the rich will be sent away empty. This will be the new Creation. This new Creation will not happen “someday”, it is not a faint beacon barely glimpsed on the distant horizon; rather it is happening right now in her body. This is the article of faith for an Easter people, who live without death: the new Creation happens *in our lifetimes*.

Given that God is the mother of us all, it must delight and overwhelm Her when her daughter Mary chooses to be pregnant. You can almost imagine that this is why she sent angels to ask Mary; she can’t bear to ask her daughter herself. She will be too sad if Mary says no, which would not be fair to Mary. And she will be too overcome if she says yes. There is a charming humility in this Mother God of ours; though she so often speaks directly to her prophets about love and justice and righteousness, she demurs to whisper something so intimate as motherhood. She has too much respect for Mary to draw so close. Motherhood is not a more important or decisive call than the others; our Mother dreams many things for her children, and so long as we love one another, all Her dreams will be fulfilled. Those of us like her Grandson Jesus, who choose not to have children, are choosing to have something else. I like the image of Mother God too shy to ask her daughter this daunting thing directly. But it may not be shyness. It may be that where the call to justice must be forceful, the call to motherhood can never be. Motherhood must be chosen freely, and perhaps God did not wish to bias Mary’s choice.

Mother’s Day Sunday is always somewhat unwieldy for this reason. How do we celebrate the mothers in our midst the way we mean to, with the same humility and gentleness and freedom from coercion of our Mother God? How do we celebrate motherhood as a vocation that does not require pregnancy or birth, that honors pregnancy and birth but equally honors adoption? How do we celebrate the choice to become a mother, even as we celebrate the choice not to become one? So Mother’s Day is challenging. Though it is the first day of a new week, this year’s Mother’s Day Sunday can not forget the difficult days of the last week. How do we mark a Mother’s Day like the one we have this year, with the old clouds of persecution and oppression strengthening over this country?

This is why I needed Mary's song. I needed to remember a Mother God who is respectful of her daughter's choices. I needed to remember this strange holy family, of a Grandmother who gave birth to us all yet does not presume to force pregnancy on another woman, and then who has a grandson who will choose not to have children of his own. In this kind of strange family—that was subversive in antiquity and I'm afraid remains subversive today—motherhood is rich and dignified beyond measure, yet unassumed, and freely chosen. In this New Testament creation myth, we can rediscover our Genesis—a God so teeming, so overflowing with love, freely decides to create life, and grants freedom to Her creatures to make lives of their own. At times, this freedom leads her children into great hardship. A lack of trust in God's love and grace can lead to some very bad choices. It can, for example, lead us to a society where supreme court judges do not respect the people they serve. It can lead to a society where highfalutin words about being 'pro-life' conjure the cruelest laws against women. It can lead us even into a society where the powerful are allowed to do what even God would not dare.

Mary is a monumental mother, her revolutionary pregnancy surely brings God overwhelming joy. But we read about another woman this morning too. She does not appear to be pregnant. In fact, in Matthew's account, she isn't even given a name. Jesus is seated, surrounded by disciples, and she appears. She does not bother to announce herself. She doesn't say anything, she doesn't sing the Magnificat. She doesn't pay the disciples any mind, she doesn't defer to them, or ask them for permission. She simply strides in, and with respect but clearly on a path she will not be pushed from, she tips an alabaster jar and pours out an expensive, lavish ointment on Jesus' head.

The lack of description given of this woman – the facelessness of her, her anonymity, her voicelessness – suggests she was a working class woman, maybe one of the urban poor who had gathered at the city gates to herald the coming of a new kind of king on Palm Sunday. It suggests that she is one of the mass of people who hunger for a revolution; one of those desperate enough to look on social and political upheaval with the same favor that Mary does in her song, who is not frightened by a bolt of lightning but prays for it, that it might break the oak thrones and undemocratic power of supreme rulers. On the other hand, the ointment is costly. It is possible in her desperation that she stole it. Or, maybe she is actually well off, yet overlooked anyway because she is still a woman.

In any case, the disciples are scandalized. What right does this woman have to do this? They attack her for being wasteful, they say this fancy ointment should have been sold, the proceeds given to the poor. But then Jesus, the Grandson of the Mother God, the one whose mother raised him to believe in the freedom of all people, whose mother taught him to be kind and gentle but as bold as necessary to break the grip of the powerful on the lowly; whose mother taught him to break the laws that need breaking, and to uphold the ones that make love real and true on earth...this young man named Jesus can hardly believe his ears. Time and again Jesus is frustrated by his disciples. Do they not understand that this woman's boldness, her freedom, is exactly what is called for in this moment? That her defiance of the world around her is part and parcel of the gospel itself? That she, by anointing Jesus so lavishly, has anointed him her true king?

To Jesus, the disciples' suddenly urgent concern about the welfare of the poor, is ridiculous. As he says to remind and rebuke them, the poor are always with them: at all times, every hour, every minute of every day, we can do what needs to be done to end poverty. But suddenly in the midst of this moment when an unnamed woman would coronate Jesus king, the Son of Mary and God – suddenly *now* the disciples get religion on poverty. Oh, these men care so much for the children who could be fed with the cost of that ointment – but only say so when a woman has upstaged them. But the unnamed woman shows the disciples and each of us today that, as George Buttrick once wrote, our faith "cannot take a routine course: the vase of life must [sometimes] be broken," so that its fragrance may spread and "change the climate of our world."

Jesus sees this woman in all her dignity and courage, in all her reverence for justice and in all her irreverence for the unearned status of men, and he commends her. And more than this, he says that the unnamed woman, like his mother Mary, should be remembered for all time. Jesus says to us that the

women of the world, the named and unnamed, are already doing more than even the disciples to free us from death.

Mother's Day Sunday is the start of a new week, one we need after the news of the past week. We should pay close attention to these scriptures today. They tell us a lot about the nature of God, about the chosen vocation of motherhood, about what it takes to change the world. And today is Choir Sunday. I've let their music speak for itself, but being a choir singer is another inspired vocation. Our choir is made up of many unique voices, and supported by talented accompanists; it is also made up of many unique people, forming a strange kind of family. I have described them before as a community within a community; I mean that, in order to do what they do – and this past year has been a particular challenge – they must endeavor to be open and affirming of one another, they must be willing to push and challenge and support one another. They must overcome hurdles, and draw on the past to make something new. A church choir like ours is a kind of sacrament; it anoints us, it makes real in a bold instant, in our midst, the new Creation that God is surely bringing about. Whatever it is, or however it is, whether we call it God or the spirit or the divine artist who calls them, our choir sings like Mary, and they do what the unnamed woman does: (to borrow again from Buttrick) they help us see that "God made the harvest fields beautiful in waving grain, as well as bountiful; and God has transfigured the dust of the ground on which we walk and the air our lungs must breathe into the rapture of sunrise and sunset." Once again, our choir has done a beautiful thing. Let this congregation take care not to forget what this choir and its faithful director have achieved together this year.

Because in times like these, we are going to need a lot more singing. And we are going to need more strange families, of every size and shape. The mother of us all, our Creator, wants us to live free from death. We have a long way to go. But we will get there together.

Alleluia and amen.