

SERMON TITLE: "Mothers of the Church"
SERMON TEXT: John 20:1, 11-18 (also 1 Samuel 1; Judges 4:4-7 and 5:7)
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: May 13, 2018 (Mother's Day) at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

I want to begin this sermon by saying, "Thank you," to all the United Methodist Women who are giving leadership in worship today. Serving as greeters, ushers, song leader, liturgist, mission speaker, recognition-pin giver, preacher, Sunday School teachers, and coffee fellowship hostesses, we women are definitely serving God and the church. Like women of faith throughout history, we are claiming our right and responsibility to nurture and raise up generations of believers in Jesus Christ.

There's a song in our *United Methodist Hymnal* called "The First One Ever." We rarely sing it because, unfortunately, the ballad is drawn out and difficult to sing. But the lyrics convey something important. The first verse tells about "Mary, the Maid of Galilee," who was "the first one ever . . . to know of the birth of Jesus." The second verse tells about the Samaritan woman at the well, who was "the first one ever to know" that Jesus was the Messiah. The third verse tells about the women Mary, Joanna, and Mary Magdalene who were "the first ones ever . . . to know of" Jesus' resurrection. The hymn indicates that these women were blessed by God because of their early perception and belief. Also implied in the song is the truth that we who come to the blessings of Christian faith today do so because of the early experience and dedicated witness of these mothers of the church.¹

Since those days when Christian faith was first born, there have been countless other women who have been instrumental in telling and nurturing the good news of Jesus. Because this is Mother's Day, it seems like a good time to remember and celebrate the many mothers of the church.

1—BIBLICAL MOTHERS

We begin with the biblical mothers, and our gospel reading from John 20. In each of the four gospels, the details of Easter morning are told differently, with varying numbers of women described

and named. But always it was women who were first on the scene, discovering the empty tomb, and hearing the angelic message that Jesus had risen from the dead. In John's version of events, Mary Magdalene was the first one to speak to the risen Lord. She was the first one to obey his resurrection instructions. She was the first one to announce Jesus' message to the rest of the disciples.

Besides Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of Jesus, and the Samaritan woman at the well, there were many other important biblical mothers. In the children's sermon this morning, we talked about Hannah. The Old Testament book of First Samuel tells us how Hannah prayed for a baby. When God blessed her with a son, mother Hannah dedicated young Samuel to God and turned him over to the priest Eli for training as a prophet of God and leader of the Hebrew people. A few minutes ago, we also read from the Old Testament book of Judges, about how the prophetess and military leader Deborah became a mother to the nation of Israel.

Despite the fact that the Bible is mostly a book about men, there are dozens of other women in the scriptures whom we could name as biblical mothers. Matthew 15 tells us about a Canaanite mother who came to Jesus to beg for the healing of her daughter. Acts 16 tells us about Lydia, who responded to Paul's message and led all the members of her household to be baptized. In his letter to the Romans, chapter 16, Paul commended Phoebe as "a deacon (or minister) for the church at Cenchrea," he named Priscilla as one of his "fellow workers," he indicated that "Tryphena and Tryphosa were women who "work[ed] hard in the Lord," he said Rufus' mother had been "a mother" to him also, and Paul listed Julia "with the saints."

Most of these women were probably biological mothers. But they were also mothers of the church because of their positive response to God's calling in their lives. Besides raising their own families in the faith, they offered their homes as meeting places, gave important leadership to the church, and told the good news of Jesus to those who had not yet heard. These biblical women were the first mothers of the church.

2—METHODIST MOTHERS

This year of 2018 is a year of important history for us. Not only is our congregation celebrating our tenth anniversary here in this building; our denomination is also celebrating the fiftieth anniversary since The Evangelical United Brethren merged with The Methodists to form The United Methodist Church in 1968. So, as we look back on our United Methodist history, we can remember and celebrate our Methodist mothers, who have pushed open the doors to women's leadership in our denomination.

This story begins with John and Charles Wesley's mother Susanna back in the early 1700s. While her Church of England preacher husband was away from home for extended periods of time, Susanna became the spiritual leader of her family and their Epworth congregation. Thinking it not quite right for a woman to take on that role, Susanna hesitated at first to give spiritual guidance beyond her own family. But her Bible studies and prayer meetings grew in popularity until Susanna was, in fact, preaching to large groups of people.

Later, when John Wesley was organizing the Methodist bands, class meetings, and preaching sites around England, there were often times when a woman would rise up in a similar fashion. The need was there for someone to give spiritual leadership and speak the gospel of Christ. In the absence of a man who was willing or able, a woman stepped forward and claimed the calling. Sarah Crosby, Mary Bosanquet, Sarah Ryan, and Sarah Mallet were some of the women that Wesley deemed to have an "extraordinary call" from God that overcame any prohibitions, rules, or laws against women preaching the gospel.

As the Methodist movement migrated to America, American women were likewise growing their talents of leadership and gifts of preaching as they filled spiritual needs by praying, testifying, exhorting, and finally preaching the gospel. Jarena Lee and Fanny Newell were two women who served as licensed Methodist preachers in the early 1800s. Phoebe Palmer became a well-known Methodist teacher, author, and public speaker in the mid-1800s. A branch of Methodism known as the Methodist

Protestant Church was the first group to begin giving women full authorization for preaching in 1875.

The next Methodist-type group to do so was the United Brethren in 1889.

The larger Methodist Episcopal Church and Methodist Episcopal Church, South, held firmly against women's clergy rights long after their denominational merger of 1939. But women continued to make themselves available to fill pulpits that no male clergy wanted, and over time, the mood of the denomination shifted. After the General Conference of 1952 once again laughed off the request of women to be granted full clergy rights, some of the women present resolved that women's right to preach "was no longer to be treated as a laughing matter! The consequence was action by the Woman's Society of Christian Service which resulted in over 2,000 petitions on the subject to the [next] General Conference."² With this push, on May 4, 1956, the leaders of the church finally voted to give women the same clergy rights as men.

Since 1956, it's hardly been easy sailing for women in ministry. But responding faithfully to the call of God, the numbers of ordained women have steadily increased. Today, in our Rocky Mountain Conference, about 40% of United Methodist pastors are women.

3—CHRISTIAN MOTHERS

That's the story of the mothers of Methodism who are ordained and licensed ministers. But there are a lot more mothers of the church for us to remember and celebrate. These Christian mothers are the ones who fulfill their calling by loving their families, volunteering in the community, and helping in the church. These mothers are nurses, teachers, engineers, and homemakers. They work in banks and law firms and military bases. They juggle a multitude of details every day in order to keep their families fed, washed, dressed, prepared, educated, and in the right place at the right time. These are the mothers who nurture and nag, comfort and cajole—all in an attempt to prepare their children for the challenges and opportunities of life. These are the mothers who lead not only their own kids, but their grandkids and neighbor kids too. These are the mothers who teach Sunday School and organize

scout troops. These are the mothers who care for the elderly, as well as the young. These are the mothers who are willing not only to cooperate with and learn from their peers, but also to step forward as leaders in their church and community. These are the mothers who organize rallies and lobby their representatives to support the marginalized and the outcast.

If just listening to all that tires you out, you might appreciate the story of a kind and nurturing woman who, after praying for those on her church's prayer list, decided to call a young mother and see how she was feeling.

"Terrible," came the reply. "[I've been praying for relief.] My head's splitting and my back and legs are killing me. The house is a mess, and the kids are simply driving me crazy."

Very sympathetically the caller said, "Listen, go and lie down. I'll come over right away and cook lunch for you, clean up the house, and take care of the children while you get some rest. By the way, how is Sam?"

"Sam?" the [sick mother] gasped. "Who is Sam?"

"My heavens," exclaimed the first woman, "I must have dialed the wrong number."

There was a long [awkward] pause. "Are you still coming over [to help me]?" the harried mother asked hopefully.³

Christian mothers are busy people who surely do get sick and worn out sometimes. But they're also women who model the importance of prayer, Bible reading, and worship because—no matter how many helpful friends they may have—ultimately, they rely on God for their strength.

CONCLUSION

On this Mother's Day, it's good for us to remember and celebrate the mothers of the church, for they're the ones who give us hope and courage. They're very often the first ones to kiss our owies and tell us the good news that things really will get better. They know this because they have witnessed the resurrection, because they have seen the church change to become more inclusive and respectful of all people, and because they have experienced God's strength when they have called upon the Lord in prayer. Praise God for all these wise and influential mothers of the church!

¹Linda Wilberger Egan, lyrics and music, 1980, in *UMH* (UM Publishing House, Nashville: 1989), #276.

²Barbara Troxell, "Ordination of Women in the United Methodist Tradition," *Methodist History* 37, as found in Patricia J. Thompson, *Courageous Past—Bold Future: The Journey toward Full Clergy Rights for Women in The United Methodist Church* (GBHEM: Nashville, 2006), p. 28. The general information in this whole section of the sermon comes from Thompson's book.

³Rev. Dennis Marquardt adapted from Bobby Moore, *Any Old Port in a Storm*, as I found it in email from esermons.com .