

SERMON TITLE: “Mothers of the Church”

SERMON TEXT: Judges 4:4-7 and Luke 24:5-10

PREACHER: Rev. Kim James

OCCASION: May 12, 2024 (Mother’s & UWF Day) at First United Methodist Church

INTRODUCTION

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

Since the days when the Christian faith was first born, countless women have been instrumental in perceiving and sharing 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 Luke 24. 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 perceiving that Jesus had risen from the dead. In Luke’s version of events, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James are mentioned by name, plus we are told that there were “other women with them.” All of these women are credited with telling the apostles what they had witnessed. They were the first ones to proclaim the resurrection. They were the first ones to share the faith that gave birth to the church.

Of course, there are additional women who were important biblical mothers. You likely remember the story of Sarah who had a child in her old age and Hagar who was forced to take herself

and her son out of an abusive situation. Maybe you recall the story of Moses' mother who had to put her baby in a reed basket to save his life, which then made it possible for Pharaoh's daughter to adopt and raise him. Maybe you remember Hannah who prayed for a son so emotionally that the priest thought she was drunk. Maybe you remember Naomi, whose two sons died and whose daughter-in-law Ruth decided to remain like a daughter with her, wherever she would go. And, of course, just a few minutes ago, Victoria read to us 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 gave a long list of women who had assisted in growing the Christian church. He 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

Mothers of the church can also be seen in our United Methodist Church's history. That story begins with John and Charles Wesley's mother Susanna in England 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. 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, and 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, women again provided leadership in the church. The reading about Barbara Heck, “the Mother of American Methodism” certainly shows that. Other American women 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, hymnwriter, 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!” This prompted action from the Women’s

Society of Christian Service, which was the predecessor to UMW and United Women in Faith. The WSCS action inspired “over 2000 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 to the call of God, the numbers of ordained women have steadily increased.

3—CHRISTIAN MOTHERS

That’s the story of the mothers of Methodism who became preachers. 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, 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 children for the challenges and opportunities of life. Even in retirement years, these mothers continue to connect, encourage, and guide their younger generations. These are the mothers who teach Sunday School and provide snacks after the soccer game. These are the mothers who care for the elderly, as well as the young. These are the mothers who organize rallies and lobby their representatives to support the marginalized and the outcast. 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 community and church.

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

“Terrible,” came the reply. “[I’ve been praying to God 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 [fix] 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

Mothers are busy people who surely do get sick and worn out sometimes, and who serve others too. By gaining strength from prayer and mutual support, the mothers of the church do amazing things.

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’ve witnessed the resurrection, because they’ve seen the church change to become more inclusive and respectful of all people, and because they’ve 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!

¹Barbara 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.

²Adapted from Bobby Moore, *Any Old Port in a Storm*, as I found it at www.esermons.com some years ago.