



1st United Methodist Church

The Heart of Downtown Gainesville 352-372-8523

419 N.E. First Street Gainesville, Florida 32601 FAX: 352-372-2524

www.fumcgv.org

Mother of God

A sermon preached by Dr. Harold Henderson on Mother's Day, May 10, 2009.

If you come from a background in the Catholic Tradition or from some sections of the Anglican Tradition, and many of you come from one or the other, you will be familiar with the term “Mother of God” as a designation for Mary, the mother of Jesus. If you come from a background in the Orthodox Tradition, you will be familiar with the Greek word, *theotokos* meaning “bearer of God” (hence “mother of God”). Even when the Orthodox Divine Liturgy is translated into local languages (such as English) *theotokos* is retained as a reference to Mary.

If your background is in the Traditions of the Protestant Reformation - and not all Methodists are comfortable with the Protestant label since our roots are in Anglicanism rather than the Protestant Reformation – the chances are that you will have “thrown the baby out with the bath water” (so to speak) and have no special place for Mary in your religious sensibilities.

Even though we might not like the designation of Mary as “Mother of God”, the term is a very ancient part of the Christian Tradition and, therefore, needs to be taken seriously. After lengthy and often acrimonious theological debate and none-too-subtle political maneuvering, the Council of Ephesus adopted the term as the proper designation for Mary, in 431CE. In one sense, the decision accomplished very little; the debates continued, and still do to this day 1600 years later (especially in relation to some of the later dogmas built onto that foundation) not just among Catholic, Anglican and Orthodox scholars on the one hand and Protestants on the other, but within the Catholic, Anglican and (to a lesser extent) Orthodox Traditions. What the Council did accomplish was the excommunication, exile and, in some cases, the execution of bishops and other clergy and scholars who could not accept the designation in good faith.

The interesting thing about the debate is that, although it focused on Mary's designation, it was not basically about Mary. It was about the two natures of Christ – the divine and the human and how they fit together especially in relation to the birth of Jesus. The main antagonists were Bishop Nestorius of Constantinople who emphasized the human nature of Jesus, and Bishop Cyril of Alexandria who emphasized the divine. Bishop Cyril believed that *theotokos* (Mother of God) properly acknowledged the divine nature of

Christ whereas Bishop Nestorius believed that *christokos* (Mother of Christ) was more appropriate.

Although Bishop Cyril's position won the day (partly because he had the vote taken before Bishop Nestorius' entourage arrived!), I'm not sure that Mary's designation as Mother of God contributes anything significant to affirming the divine nature of Christ. Unfortunately, what it does do is make Mary an unreal God-like figure who is out of reach to mere mortals like ourselves. And the sad thing about that is that the human Mary of the Gospels is an excellent role model, not just for motherhood, but for Christian discipleship in general.

The message for this Mother's Day is that Mary the Mother of Jesus is certainly a wonderful role model for mothers but also for fathers, for daughters and sons, for marrieds and singles, for straights and gays, for clergy and laity, for young and old, for rich and poor, indeed for all of us who are serious about our Christian discipleship.

There are just two aspects of Mary as role model that I want to emphasize today:

1. Mary heard the call of God (in her case to motherhood) and responded to it with humility and grace.

Luke tells the story (1:26-38) of how the angel Gabriel visited Mary, probably a teenager at the time, and announced to her that she would give birth to a very special son whom she would name Jesus and explained why he would be so named. Mary, perplexed and even fearful, expressed doubt that this could happen, to which Gabriel responded by assuring her that "nothing will be impossible with God" (v.37).

Although Mary was overwhelmed by incredulity and uncertainty, her magnificent response to Gabriel marks her out as a remarkable role model for all Christian disciples: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (v.38).

When, later, Mary told her cousin, Elizabeth, about the angel's visit, she broke out in the praise and worship of God in what has come to be known as *The Magnificat*:

*"My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed;
For the Mighty One has done great things for me,
And holy is his name...(vv. 46-49ff).*

This response to the call of God does not sound like any kind of prelude to the title of Mother of God. It sounds more like the gracious and awe-inspiring response of a humble servant of God ready to be and to do whatever God wills, even though it goes way beyond her comprehension and her comfort zone. And it seems to me that we blunt the impact of this Mary as a role model if we make her into some kind of a God-like figure

rather than identify with her as a mere mortal struggling like ourselves to respond with humility and grace to the call of God that comes to us.

2. Mary remained focused on her call, despite limited understanding, pain and deep grief.

From beginning to end Mary lived out her call as a mother. She gave birth to Jesus; she went looking for him as a 12-year-old when he was left behind at the Temple in Jerusalem; she deferred to him at the wedding at Cana in Galilee; she was there when Jesus, told that his family was waiting to greet him, forthrightly declared that the needy crowd gathered around him was his family; she was among the growing band of disciples who joined him as he made his way to Jerusalem for Passion Week; she was there at the foot of the Cross; she was there among the disciples who shared in his post-resurrection appearances.

Mary is a challenging role model for all of us - mothers and others – both by responding with humility and grace to the call of God, and by remaining true to that call through thick and thin. And the exciting thing is that, if Mary, a lowly mortal, can do it, so can we – with the same humility, grace and persistence.

I read recently of a mother whose daughter announced to the family that she and her husband were thinking about having a baby, and who asked what the family thought of the idea.

The mother didn't want to sound discouraging but thought of a long catalog of changes that would impact her daughter's life profoundly – “changes that she would not learn about in childbirth classes,” changes affecting her lifestyle, her career, her relationship with her husband, her priorities, even her values, and much more.

“My daughter's quizzical look,” the mother writes, “makes me realize that tears have formed in my eyes.” “You'll never regret it,” I finally say. “Then I reach across the table, squeeze my daughter's hand and offer a silent prayer for her, and for me, and for all of us mere mortal women who stumble their way into this most wonderful of callings. This blessed gift from God...that of being a Mother.” *

It sounds like Mary, doesn't it? Focused on God's call, through all the uncertainties and ambivalent feelings. What a wonderful role model for mothers, and for all of us, to respond to the call of God with humility and grace, and to remain focused on the Divine calling, come what may.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

* Full statement available on request to the church office.