

Mary: Mother of God or Jewish Mother?

From the Eastertide series: Credo

Text Luke 1:35; Mark 3:21; Acts 1:14

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

On this Mothers' Day, a day in which we celebrate the Christian family, the human family, I thought it would be well to tie the two together with the Eastertide series on "Credo, I Believe." I tried to say last week that the mystery of the Christian story, the Christian revelation is that, when God is revealed supremely, God is revealed in the human, and that the human becomes the container or the agent of the divine. Not that we are human; we are only on the way to being human. We are beckoned by the Spirit to transcend that which we've yet known. But, in our midst, there was this one about whom they said, "Now, that's it," and we are beckoned to fulfill our humanity because to be human thus would be to be divine. The Apostles' Creed, the most common creed that we share, is very clear about the fact that the Christian drama is rooted in history: "...conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, crucified, dead, buried." The drama that we celebrate in the Christian tradition is rooted solidly in history, and of course, that word that became flesh had a mother and, in order to get at what I want to deal with this morning, I raise the question of Mary - was she mother of God, or a Jewish mother?

The Church, of course, defined her as the mother of God in the development of the creedal tradition. The Council of Ephesus, in 431 CE, declared Mary to be *Theotokos*, a Greek word meaning *God bearer*. From that point it was the orthodox Christian teaching about Mary who was the mother of God. There was a great debate and controversy, much conflict over those early centuries. It was not until 451 in the Council of Chalcedon that we had the phrase, "true God, true man," and then not much was done with that. That was about where it remained until the 19th century when critical studies began to look at those Christian origins. If Jesus was human, the Church claimed, Jesus was also God, and so that made Mary a God bearer, or the mother of God. It is interesting that, in Roman Catholic piety to this day, Mary is the center of much devotion.

It was 1864 when the Pope decreed that Mary was immaculately conceived herself, thus she was a perfect instrument for bringing forth this word made flesh. It was as recent as 1950 that another papal decree declared Mary had been bodily

assumed into heaven. As some have said, Mary has been defined as the ideal woman. Now, the feminist movement has challenged that because that ideal woman was defined by males, by an all-male Church, and the Mary, in that ethereal image created by the Church, is submissive, obedient, chaste, hardly a Jewish mother.

But, when you read the scriptures, you get another picture. Oh, to be sure, she is visited by an angel in Luke's story, and in Matthew, as well. Scholars generally feel that those birth narratives have been added to the beginning of both Gospels. But, in any case, what they were trying to say is what other ancient peoples said about other ancient heroes, that this one was special, that this one was from God. I don't know if they thought about it literally or not. Certainly, symbolically it was true. But, if they did think about it literally, then one wonders about this passage in the third chapter of Mark's Gospel. Jesus is about his ministry and the word on the street is that he comes home and is out of his mind, he is mad. His mother and his brothers go out to bring him home because of the rumors that are being spread about him.

As I read the Gospel accounts of Mary, I choose to see her as a Jewish mother. I want you to know that I called Rabbi Alan Alpert in order to ask him about whether or not it was okay to talk about a Jewish mother because it is a stereotype, of course. Fortunately, Alan wasn't home, but I talked to Anna, his lovely wife, who is a Jewish mother, and she gave me permission to talk about a Jewish mother. She said, as long as you intend it honorably, and I assured her I intend it honorably. I see Mary as a model, as a Jewish mother, as a human mother, as a parent who yearned for her child. I see her in all of her humanness which gives us encouragement and can make her a model for our devotion – not some ethereal image of a bloodless feminine, but rather, this woman who bore this child for whom she cared, and she nurtured him, followed him, pursued him, and was hurt by him. Mary, a Jewish mother, on Mothers' Day, a mother who was an example of that bonding, that wonderful, beautiful, human bonding of parent and child.

I like Mary as a model because she tells me that, with all of the potential beauty and wonder of the human family, of human ties that bind, of the bonding in family community, that human community in the family is not always easy. It is potentially also painful and brings with it potential brokenness.

Now, wouldn't it be wonderful if we all had perfect families? If there were perfect parents raising perfect children? But, it simply isn't so. If we could have two-parent families raising the children, a recent University of Chicago study says, all would be better. Well, of course, it would. But, thank God, we are not left in hopelessness or despair.

We have the picture of a Mary and it wasn't easy for Mary to raise Jesus. We have those little signals in the Gospel, the song of Simeon, for example, taking the baby in his arms at the circumcision of Jesus, and saying to Mary, "A sword will go

through your heart." Well, what parent is there that doesn't know, now and again, a sword piercing their heart? Or, the second chapter where Luke tells us that story of Jesus left behind in Jerusalem where he says, "Don't you know I have to be about my father's business?" And Mary, hurt, confused, pondering these things in her heart. One wonders, if Gabriel had really stood on her shoulder and whispered in her ear, why she didn't just smile at all of this. No, she was a Jewish mother who went through it just like you go through it, and following this one was not an easy task. She stood at the foot of his cross. She saw him in anguish crucified. And the *pieta* is an image that is imprinted upon our minds as this mother holds her crucified son.

I like Mary as a model because she tells me that, whatever the ideal may be, whatever sociological studies they tell us, whatever the Church may advocate, the human situation is messy. It can be very painful. There is woundedness and we have to make do oftentimes with less than ideal situations and relationships. And so, we see Mary as a sign of hope because she also tells us that to raise a child is to fight cultural conformity. The word on the street was that Jesus was out of his mind. She yielded to the pressure. She went after him. She wanted to bring him home. It's not easy to raise a creative, free spirit. There is such community pressure. There is such cultural conformity demanded of us.

Do your kids play soccer? Do they march in the band? Do they play sports at school? Do they sing in the choir? Do they do a hundred and one other things that are organized for them to do? Are you choosing what your children do? Are you making the decisions, or are you going along with what everybody else is doing? Are you signing up your kids for some things that really in your heart you feel you hadn't ought to sign them up for so that you give them some time just to be kids? But then, what if they fall behind the neighborhood kids? I mean, it's not easy, folks, is it? Raising children is not easy. There is a tremendous pressure in the community and in the culture and parents need to stand apart and ask, "Am I simply being swept along with the tide, or am I deciding, am I determining how my child will be shaped and that with which my child will be shaped?" It's not easy.

Mary felt the pressure. She wanted to bring him home. It is not easy to raise a free spirit and let it go.

I read the little passage from Acts because, after the resurrection and the ascension, Luke tells us there that the disciples gathered in the upper room with some of the women, and Mary, the mother of Jesus, was there, and his brothers. That tells me that, even where there is brokenness and woundedness and confusion and misunderstanding, there is always the potential, the possibility for reconciliation. Mary was able to pray with that early community that was the consequence of this one, her son, who had embarrassed her and who had hurt her. She was able to pray with James, his brother, who became the pillar of that Jerusalem Church.

That is another whole sermon, but how interesting it is that James became the pillar of the conservative Jerusalem Church. It took a Paul to have a vision, a grander vision of bringing this ministry to the whole world. Maybe James could not grow to be able to break out of his Jewishness, but he grew enough to see in his brother somebody special, and he became a leader of that movement in the home community.

I like the fact that, in this story we have also a pointer to that larger community that transcends the blood family.

Honor and thanksgiving to God for the blood ties that bind us. But, Jesus had to say to his mother, or said to the crowd that kept his mother from him, "Who is my mother? Who are my brothers and sisters? Those that do the will of God." Thereby Jesus was saying that there is something thicker than blood. It is that faith vision that binds a community together. It is that larger community that calls us, that enables us to fly, to soar, that inspires us and calls the best out of us, the transcending of the family in a larger human community. But, thank God for those who are able, within the family, the intimate ties of family, together to experience that larger community of faith.

This congregation has been blessed this morning. At the 8:30 service, two granddaughters of Marv and Thelma Bottema came to affirm their faith, Thelma diagnosed with cancer. They have always been a beautiful family, Marv and Thelma, with five children always in and out of that house at Leonard and Pruin. There's a lot of living in that house. And then the next generation comes along. Then Thelma is diagnosed with a very serious cancer, and what happens? I see the intensity of the bonding. I see children dropping in all the time, and I see the grandchildren coming around. I see Julie and Susan saying, "For Mothers' Day, we would like to affirm our faith and we're going to try to get Grandma there." And she was here this morning. I see the granddaughters coming at 8:30 and kneeling here at the rail with Marv and Thelma, Gramps and Grandma. Thelma knelt with her granddaughters at this table, from the kitchen table to the Lord's table. I'll tell you what, that's powerful and that's beautiful and that's just so moving.

I have been with the Stille family, too, in all kinds of situations. Hattie, whom we baptize today, is named after one by whose grave I stood as the family shoveled in the dirt in that earthy acknowledgment of the reality of death. I've been there - marriages, baptisms, and housewarmings, and I know them as models of the deepest and the best of that bonding in family that is celebrated in the larger family, and I want to tell you, it doesn't get any better than that.

We are invited in our families to the deepest, most meaningful human experience, and we come here in ritual and rite to celebrate it in the larger community. I want you to know that, as the human drama was wrought out in human flesh, the drama of salvation, God is in the human, God is in-between us, and the experience of love, one for the other, is the experience of God.

A young couple stood here yesterday and wrote their own vows and spoke them to each other, and in deep emotion expressed their love in discovery, and I could say to them, "You don't know anything yet, for having fallen in love and now beginning to work at being in love, you will discover between you the love of God." For if we don't know the love of God in the other, we'll know not the love of God at all. In my favorite Broadway musical, "Les Miserables," Cozette sings to the dying Jean Valjean, "To love another person is to see the face of God."