

Mary and the Great Prayer

Sunday, May 9, 2021 at The First Congregational Church of Marshalltown, Iowa

Luke 1:38 "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her. (repeated on Sunday, May 9, 2021, Mothers' Day, at The First Congregational Church of Marshalltown, Iowa)

There was a little boy named Johnny who used to hang out at the local corner market. The owner didn't know what Johnny's problem was, but the boys would constantly tease him. They would always comment that he was two bricks shy of a load, or two pickles short of a barrel. To prove it, sometimes they would offer Johnny his choice between a nickel (5 cents) and a dime (10 cents) and John would always take the nickel – they said, because it was bigger. One day after John grabbed the nickel, the store owner took him aside and said, "Johnny, those boys are making fun of you. They think you don't know the dime is worth more than the nickel. Are you grabbing the nickel because it's bigger, or what?" Slowly, Johnny turned toward the store owner and a big grin appeared on his face and Johnny said, "Well, if I took the dime, they'd stop doing it, and so far I have saved \$20!"

Those bullies tried to define that little boy as foolish because he always took the nickel instead of the dime, but he proved to be smarter than they. Different people in our lives, some kind, some not, have probably tried to define us and tell us who we are and what are our limitations and potentials. Parents may look at their boy and say that he is bright but clumsy, or schoolyard thugs may define him as dumb and clumsy. Who has the right to tell us who we are? Mary, the mother of Jesus, gives us a good example of how to respond to that question.

It is believed that Mary was in her teen years, living quietly with her parents and preparing for her wedding to Joseph, a young carpenter. At one point she receives a visit from the archangel Gabriel, the one traditionally assigned to bring important news. Gabriel tells her that she will be the mother of the Messiah and she does not seem that surprised at the news that He is coming, simply that she is still a virgin. Gabriel explains that this is a miraculous conception, possibly in keeping with His pre-existence and deity. Gabriel adds that her elder relative Elizabeth is expecting for nothing is impossible for God. Mary responds, "here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Gabriel leaves.

The marvel of Mary's response shines when we consider the situation she entered as soon as she agreed to this plan. I'm not sure why God arranged the circumstances of Jesus' birth to be so messy, other than to make the comment that He was entering a messy, mixed-up world. In the culture of Israel at the birth of Jesus, the betrothal was taken even more seriously than the actual marriage ceremony. Back then, if a young woman became pregnant and she was not married, it was not a major social or moral problem if she was betrothed. Back then, one could not break off the engagement with one's betrothed, there had to be a divorce. So the fact that Mary would be pregnant before the wedding was not such a big deal, except for the fact that she had never been intimate with Joseph, and Joseph knew it. The Bible indicates that Joseph, being a kind man, was not going to make a public spectacle of Mary, because he knew that the accusation of infidelity could cost the accused her life, but he planned to divorce her just the same. It took an angel meeting him in a dream and explaining the situation to him before Joseph agreed to carry on as planned. I suspect that people talked about the circumstances of the birth of Jesus for years after He was born. In fact, years later, when Jesus was having one of His many disagreements with the

professional religious leadership of His day, his opponents spit out the words “we are not born of fornication” (John 8:41). I think that it was a studied insult, and that the questionable circumstance of Jesus’ birth was a topic of discussion throughout His life, and that of Joseph’s and Mary’s. The controversy even followed Jesus to Jerusalem. Perhaps one of the things that God wanted to say in this is that one of the sources of evil in the world is not just selfish actions, but the words spoken when people at “two plus two and get three” if you know what I mean. There were people who tried to define Jesus as a disgraced son of a disgraced mother who had a weak father who stayed when he should have left. That’s what Mary let herself in for when she said “be it done to me according to your word”.

But Mary did not pay attention to that. The import of her words to the angel that day was, in effect, “I belong to God. I am what God says I am. God can do with me what God wants.” She leaves a wonderful example for us, because while her experience with God is unique, her response is appropriate for all of us. We are what God says we are, not what the world says we are. The world, or people in the world, makes many attempts to define us, often in destructive ways. Bullies in school say we’re weak or stupid, bad parents say we are a nuisance and of no value. Bad employers say we are expendable and of no use. Culture says that we need to be young and in great health and look good or we don’t deserve to live. We are to listen to none of them. The Christian is defined by what God says, and God says much about the identity and definition of a Christian. Here’s a list-

You are accepted...

You are God's child ~ John 1:12

As a disciple you are a friend of Jesus Christ ~ John 15:15

You have been justified ~ Romans 5:1

You are united with the Lord, and I am one with Him in spirit ~ 1 Corin. 6:17

You have been bought with a price, and I belong to God ~ 1 Corin. 6:19-20

You are a member of Christ's body ~ 1 Corin. 12:27

You have been chosen by God and adopted as His child ~ Ephesians 1:3-8

You have been redeemed and forgiven of all my sins ~ Colossians 1:13-14

You are complete in Christ ~ Colossians 2:9-10

You have direct access to the throne of grace through Jesus Christ ~ Hebrews 4:14-16

You are secure...

You are free from condemnation ~ Romans 8:1-2

You are assured that God works for my good in all circumstances ~ Romans 8:28

You are free from any condemnation brought against me, and I cannot be separated from the love of God ~ Romans 8:31-39

You have been established, anointed, and sealed by God ~ 2 Corin. 1:21-22

You are hidden with Christ in God ~ Colossians 3:1-4

You are confident that God will complete the good work He started in me ~ Philippians 1:6

You are a citizen of Heaven ~ Philippians 3:20

You have not been given the spirit of fear but of power, love, and a sound mind ~ 2 Timothy 1:7

You are born of God, and the evil one cannot touch me ~ 1 John 5:18

You are significant...

You are the branch of Jesus Christ, the true vine, and a channel of His life ~ John 15:5

I have been chosen and appointed to bear fruit ~ John 15:16

I am God's temple ~ 1 Corin. 3:16

I am a minister of reconciliation for God ~ 2 Corin.5:17-21

I am seated with Jesus Christ in the heavenly realm ~ Ephesians 2:6

I am God's workmanship ~ Ephesians 2:10

I may approach God with freedom and confidence ~ Ephesians 3:12

I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me ~ Philippians 4:13

I think that if May were alive today, she would make a point of not letting herself be defined by the world, a world that in her day characterized her as a woman unfit for her husband and of questionable repute. She would have said, "Lord, be it done to me according to your word" and His word would have defined her. Her circumstances were unique, but her example hold true for all of us. Choose to say "be it done to me according to Your word." Be defined by how God defines you, not anyone else.

* the joke was found at <http://www.broadcaster.org.uk/section2/jokes/parentingjokes.html>

List found at www.ficm.org