

Mary, Mother of Jesus
August 14, 2005

Singing Your Own Magnificat

“And Mary said, ‘My soul magnifies the Most High, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for God has looked with favor on the lowliness of God’s servant. Surely, from now on generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is God’s name. God’s mercy is for those who revere God from generation to generation. God has sown strength with God’s arm, and has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty; God has helped God’s servant Israel, in remembrance of God’s mercy; according to the promise God made to our ancestors, to Abraham and Sarah and to their descendants forever.’” (Luke 1: 46-55)

In what sense do you believe yourself to be favored by God? In what ways do you understand yourself to be so “blessed” by God that generations following you will acknowledge it? As you look at your life at this moment, what “great things” do you acknowledge God as doing for you or having done for you? What is your own equivalent to the song of Mary, the Magnificat?

Some of you may be clicking off your list already. It may be your child, your partner, your spouse, your lover, your best friend, or your work or position or freedom from addiction or ability to live with a life threatening condition, or having a haven in which to explore your sexuality or being free of your birth family so you can be yourself. Certainly, any of these is worthy a Magnificat.

To others it may be that life is just going on, day by day, nothing special, nothing spectacular, and no sense of anything extraordinary at all, let alone some kind of exceptional blessing. Life may be more Yawn than Magnificat.

Still others may be quick to say, “to the contrary,” no “great things” are happening to me, but instead, dreadful, terrible and awful things; not anything resembling “favor” but much closer to “curse.” I have little or no sense of “life” at all, let alone God in my life. I am aware of stress, strain, exhaustion, conflict, pain, frustration, disappointment. I have no joy, no peace, no hope. I’m hanging on and that’s about all I can accomplish. Like life itself, God seems more absent than present. Instead of a Magnificat, perhaps a Dies Irae, from the Latin Hymn, “Day of Wrath, O Day of Mourning.”

The words which today’s Gospel puts into the mouth of Mary, commonly called the Magnificat from the Latin translation of its opening line, present the young unmarried maiden speaking of an awareness of God active in her life to accomplish “favor” on her

lowliness that will make her “blessed” for generations. As the Theotokos, Mother of God, Luther’s favorite description of Mary, she is singled out for her extra ordinary role. However, being a mother in and of itself for women of her culture and time was their “ordinary” place and role. That’s what them valued by men.

Complicating Mary’s motherhood is the fact that she became pregnant out of wedlock. At the human level Mary was holding two contradictory things together: she was pregnant and unmarried, and that placed her outside the Law, outside community, and she was disgraced and condemned and rejected, while, at the same time, that which ostracized and condemned her was the very thing for which she considered herself blessed and favored by God. Does this not have a familiar ring to a lot of us here?

Most of us here have had considerable experience with being condemned, ostracized and believed to be unworthy of equal participation in our society and the communities we may have grown up in. The ELCA Convention last week reaffirmed that gays and lesbians are not acceptable as candidates for Sacred Ministry, nor are the relationships of gay and lesbian clergy worthy of being recognized. We have not been nor are we among the favored and blessed ones of our culture, its politics and religions. We are the outcasts, the throwaways, the despised, the ridiculed, like pregnant Mary.

It has also been made very clear to us who our culture considers the blessed and favored ones, regardless of sexual orientation. Growing up for boys it was being cool, excelling in sports, being good looking, having a hot care and a very good looking girl or the arm. For girls it was being a cheerleader, having a boyfriend, especially a jock, being beautiful and having a sizeable bust.

In the adult world the blessed men are those with power, wealth, influence, a man’s toys of airplanes and cars, and with a beautiful trophy wife, like Donald Trump. For women it is “having it all”—amazing career, marriage to a successful powerful man, children who are smart and beautiful, having a fabulous house with servants, and, of course, eternal youth, beauty, and a great figure. In San Francisco the blessed and favored ones live in enclaves like Cliffside and Tiburon.

I suspect any number of us in this room could tell any number of terrible stories about growing up different, of being excluded, ridiculed, humiliated or even abused, regardless of which side of the sexual aisle we sit. We may have attempted to fit in, to pass for what is favored and blessed, but it never worked. There was always the threat that we would be discovered and living with the stress of that threat and the portrayal of a lie robbed us of life and the truth.

Working through what seems to be blessed and valued in our culture and churches to that is actually blessed and valued about each of us is a parallel to what was going on with Mary. How can we believe that which makes us different, so strongly places us on the outside, is the very thing that is most blessed about us! IT is not just that others refuse to

recognize it, but that we have often internalized this lie so deeply that we lose the good we are and we let go of how blessed it is that we are different, that we are unique, that we no one is the same.

Some of us have to delete the internal videos and tapes that run in our heads telling us who we are supposed to be, how we are supposed to look and how we are supposed to behave if we are to be acceptable to our culture and the churches, let alone join those who are the favored and blessed ones. We have been told in so many ways we are cursed, perverted, degenerates and these tapes run continuously in our heads, even when we are not conscious of them.

The same is true of our religious experiences. We may have grown up with beliefs about ourselves as “poor miserable sinners” deserving judgment, wrath and condemnation unless we repented of our “difference” and changed who we were. We may have grown up with beliefs about God or the authority of the Bible or the Church or the clergy that said unless we do this or that or believe this or that or act religious in this way or that we are unacceptable to God, in fact, damned eternally by God. These messages are like poison being injected in our souls and spirits. No wonder we get sick, get depressed, and at times fall into some kind of self destructive behaviors.

I ask you, who is the “you” who is not a role, not a function, not an image not a persona, but you in you’re your inmost being? If you had to say who you are this morning and could not use words describing your function, like accountant, lawyers, nurse, flight attendant, financial advisor, social workers, professor, wine merchant manager, salesperson, student, or whatever, or words describing your role as daughter, son, mother, father, sister, brother, lover, partner, friend, or ever woman or man or gay or lesbian or trans or bi or straight—who can you say you are? Can you identify that which makes you blessed and favored?

Can you, like Mary, sing from the depths of your own being your own Magnificat, your own song of joy in your life as it is, and can you dance your own dance and bask in the Love that is there for you and in you and is, in fact, you you actually are? When you are in that inner space, that heaven on earth, then you can be all the others things you are, the many roles and functions, but you do not become them. You do not need them to define who you are and why you have value. You can take them off or put them on as the occasion occurs. You wear them like the clothing you change everyday.

Can you rediscover the excitement, joy and deliciousness of just being alive, even when things are not good, even when we are being rejected, even when being condemned? Just being able to open your eyes in the morning to the fog or sunshine—hear the song of the wind or the birds—taste the first cup of tea or coffee or chocolate—smell roses, fresh baking bread, the ocean’s salty air, jasmine—the familiar scent of the one you love --- step into the shade when hot or into the sun when cool—have someone to touch and be touched by—have someone to hug and be hugged by—to be there for someone and have

some there for you--to do something that brings an unexpected smile to someone's face and to have someone's thoughtfulness and kindness surprise you...

When I lived in Jacksonville, Florida, and was working in the hospice before there were any rules and regulations about what could be done and who could do what, I visited a sweet country lady in her upper 80s who had been born in Waycross, Georgia and lived most of her adult life in Jacksonville, in one of the old neighborhoods that had by now seen much better days. She was in the late stages of cancer, very frail, very fragile and thin. She was intent on living out the last of her days in the house she had raised her children in and had lived with her husband before he died.

When I visited she liked to sit on the swing on her wrap around porch looking out at her yard which was shaded by huge live oak trees draped with Spanish moss. The picket fence was lined with azalea bushes. I would fix up the swing with pillows and blankets to be sure she was comfortable. One visit I asked her if there was anything she regretted not doing in her life. She answered that she had been raised by very strict parents and as a young girl was not allowed to go barefoot in the grass. That was something boys could do but not girls. So I offered and carefully lifted her from the swing and carried her into the yard and slowly lowered her bare feet until they were touching the grass. A beatific vision crossed her face as she stood there wiggling her toes in the grass. Both a smile and tears formed. That night she died. I like to think, smiling. I learned an incredible lesson from that woman about being blessed and finding favor in the miracle of the ordinary.

So, what are the "take aways" for you and for me today.

First. When you come to the altar to eat and drink the meal of blessing, the words "given for you" are speaking to your heart with the voice of God: "Hail, favored one, I am with you. You are blessed and beloved. You live in my heart. I made you different because you delight me. I love as you are."

Second. During the peace or during coffee hour or some time this week, take the time to tell at least one person what quality or qualities make them blessed to you. Create a Magnificat for someone who is magnificent. Help them to sing a song of their own value.

Third. Is there something you can do that would be like standing barefoot in the grass, some way you can experience the extra ordinary of the ordinary about you every day? Now is the time!

Finally: "Hail favored one! God is with you. You are blessed among all people."
Amen.

