

“PONDERING MARY,” A Mother’s Day Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, May 9, 2021

Friends, have you ever been to Rome? As I remember, it’s a beautiful place. Someday, when the Covid-19 pandemic is history for us, maybe we can all take a group trip there. Wouldn’t that be great? Church groups have done that—Protestant, as well as Catholic.

The great Protestant Reformer Martin Luther visited Rome in 1511 and was impressed by what he saw. His only disappointment, admittedly immense, was that the morals of those inside and beyond the church walls weren’t as beautiful as all the art and architecture arrayed across the Eternal City. Back in Germany, Luther did push for the moral and theological reform of the Christians churches. But without demanding that they be denuded of the great art that had been installed over the years. Unlike the so-called iconoclasts or icon-breakers of his generation who wanted to smash everything, stained glass windows and all, stripping all churches bare for the sake of Protestant theological purity, Luther believed that great art left in place could continue to inspire us in faith.

I thought a lot about Luther when I visited Rome five hundred years after he did. I particularly understood and keenly appreciated Luther’s wisdom when I stood within the magnificently vaulted space of St. Peter’s Basilica directly before a particularly stunning sculpture by the famous Renaissance artist Michelangelo. The sculpture, shown in the upper left corner of our *Morning Tide* announcements, is called the *Pieta*—an Italian word that means “pity” or “compassion.” Sculpted in Carrara marble from the same Italian quarry that furnished the stone for our church’s courtyard statue of St. Paul, the *Pieta* was finished by Michelangelo just twelve years before Luther visited St. Peter’s Basilica. It depicts Jesus’ mother Mary with her dead son in her arms after he has been taken down from the cross.

In many respects, this sculpture from Michelangelo is rich in contradictions. For one, it’s just a hunk of stone. But Michelangelo was so God-gifted and graced with talent that mother and son look completely life-like, suffused with a supple tenderness. Likewise, the sculpture obviously records a powerfully tragic moment in the lives of mother and son. Yet both Mary and Jesus appear serene and calm—completely at peace. The final incongruous surprise is Mary’s presentation and seated pose. She looks so young, so frail. At the same time, as sculpted by Michelangelo, Mary is able to cradle the full, weighty body of her full-grown, dead son in her own two arms. As we all know, “dead weight” is heavy weight. Nevertheless, Michelangelo’s Mary accomplishes this cradling of her son she loves without apparent strain. Yes, the whole scene is improbable, if not impossible. However, this stone portrait of Mary the Mother and Jesus the Son is emotionally convincing and compelling.

When we all get to Rome, maybe when air travel isn't so scary, we'll find the beautiful *Pieta* now sitting at a distance from viewers behind a thick, bullet-proof acrylic glass shield, rather than completely unobstructed, in open air as it was for 473 years. Why the change? Why all the security? Because, sadly, it needs it—as more recent history has shown.

On Pentecost Sunday, May 21, 1972, a mentally deranged geologist from Australia suddenly attacked the *Pieta* with a foot-long hammer that folks from his profession use to break rocks. Shouting “I am Jesus Christ: I have risen from the dead!” the guy struck fifteen swift blows. In mere moments, the violent hammer-wielding attacker broke off Mary's arm at the elbow, took a chunk out of her nose, and chipped one of her eyelids. As astonished crowd of pilgrims to St. Peter's Basilica stood frozen, watching it all. However, displaying greater presence of mind, an American sculptor from St. Louis, Missouri, literally jumped into action. As he later recalled, “I leap[t] up and grabbed the guy by the beard. We both fell into the crowd of screaming Italians. It was something of a scene.”

The quick-thinking intervention halted the assault on the beloved *Pieta*. Yet onlookers took as sacred souvenirs many pieces of fractured marble that flew off. Although some of these pieces were returned, more were not. Thus, in a restoration not unlike human orthopedic surgeries, Mary's nose had to be refashioned from a section of marble cut out of her back. It was a long time before the reassembled, recemented *Pieta* could be shared with the Basilica-visiting public again.

I know that in these times of mass shootings, a statue is just a statue. Human life always matters more. However, that crazed man's act of vandalism was still an act of sacrilege in more ways than one. Besides inflicting injury upon one of the most marvelous pieces of art that God ever inspired human beings to create, it was in my book also a symbolic assault on the mother-child relationship, which Michelangelo's sculpture honors in the profoundest way. We don't have to be Roman Catholics to be appalled by what that crazed man did or to be thankful that, in spite of him, the *Pieta* survives.

I remember so very well first standing in front of the well-screened *Pieta* after it was repaired and put back in place at St. Peter's. And I've since returned. Brought to mind for me both times by Michelangelo's artistic vision was all the trial and tribulation which the real-life Mary underwent as both a woman and mother.

Admittedly, there are some today in the Roman Catholic Church who, misguided, are lobbying to have Mary exalted to the status of divinity. Claiming moral and spiritual perfection for her, these same Roman Catholics would like to see Mary proclaimed as a co-redeemer of the world alongside her son, Jesus. Yet, ironically—at least as I see it—Mary's greatness lies precisely in her abiding humanity. Indeed, she is the parent who, in

our Protestant teaching, links Jesus to the human race. Indeed, if Mary had been divine, as some of our Catholic friends now like to insist, Jesus—whose father was God—would have had no chance or opportunity to be human at all.

I have read and studied the scriptures that tell us the most about Mary. I don't see a perfect person, let alone a divine person, being described. Frankly, I am not sure that Mary always completely understood her son or appreciated his calling to be our savior and messiah. Yes, she gladly and willingly gave herself over to be a servant of the Lord, bearing whatever God called her to do, withstanding shame and embarrassment within her own community. (*Luke 1:46-55*) Yet from birth to death Jesus repeatedly left her puzzled and perplexed.

At Bethlehem, for instance, Mary seemed as much surprised as pleased by what both shepherds and Wise Men told her about the angelic voices and the star which led them to the manger. (*Luke 2:15-20; Matthew 2:10-12*) Though she “pondered these things in her heart,” she could not grasp the significance for her son's destiny. (*Luke 2:19*) Likewise, when the baby Jesus was presented at Jerusalem's Great Temple and then later returned there at age twelve, Mary could not absorb what that faithful soul Simeon, the Prophetess Anna, and Temple's wisest elders were already discerning about her son's very special future. (*Luke 2:22-38, 41-51*) Still later, after Jesus at age thirty or older had begun his ministry in earnest, Mary appears to have been as startled as everyone else by what Jesus was teaching and preaching.

When Jesus returned to Nazareth to preach, Mary and some of her other children came to retrieve him from a crowd that encircled him because the talk of the town was that he might be “beside himself”—in other words, crazy. It seems likely that Mary didn't quite know what to think. (*Mark 3:19b-35*) Notwithstanding Mary's love for her son, she was probably unsettled by her neighbors' criticisms. At this remarkable juncture Jesus pronounces those memorable statements to the gathered Nazarene crowd which still ring across the centuries. “Who are my mother and my brothers? ...You are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother, my sister, and mother.” (*Mark 3:33-35*)

Of course, even if Mary did not understand her son and or the exact nature of his role and mission on God's behalf, she loved him and always did the best she knew for him. For example, when King Herod in his murderous, power-hungry rage vowed to kill all male newborns, Mary, in the company of Joseph, travelled hundreds of miles through the most sorry conditions to the distant land of Egypt in order to protect and safeguard Jesus from harm. (*Matthew 2:16-18*) That's what mothers do, right?

Later, when they were able to return to Israel and settled in Nazareth, Mary made a home for Jesus that was always welcoming (*Matthew 2:19-23*) Although Jesus didn't

always get a good reception from the neighbors, scripture informs us that even as an adult Jesus returned home to the hearth kept by Mary at least several times. (*Mark 19b-35; Mark 6:1-16; Luke 4:6-31*)

Last, but not least, Mary was there for Jesus at the cross and beyond, once again oblivious to any personal shame, pain, or peril. Specifically, the gospels inform us that Mary, unflinching in her courage, was a personal witness to her son's crucifixion. Here was a mother wanting to assure her son, whom she birthed in pain, that he was not alone in whatever terrible pain and anguish he was going to be suffer. (*Mark 15:40; Matthew 27:55-56; John 19:25*) From the cross Jesus saw Mary and even entrusted her future care to one of his disciples, presumed to be the Apostle John. (*John 19:26-27*)

At the same time, no one was going to hold Mary back from continuing to be where she needed to be for her son's sake. First, she and other devoted women, made preparations to embalm her son's brutalized body to restore to his death some dignity. (*Luke 23:55; Mark 16:1; Matthew 28:1*) This is what put Mary among the privileged circle who discovered Jesus' empty tomb and received the first news of his resurrection. (*Matthew 28:2-10; Mark 16:3-6; Luke 24:1-7*) Secondly, two gospels affirm that Mary was one of those who first proclaimed the risen Christ. (*Matthew 28:10; Luke 24:8-11*) Thirdly and finally, as our morning reading from the Book of Acts attests, Mary was part of the original prayer circle gathering in her son's memory which launched the Christian Church. (*Acts 1:12-14*) As Jesus' own mother, Mary's very presence at that prayer gathering undoubtedly lent an extra authority to what the apostles, including her younger son, James, were trying to accomplish out of faithfulness to God and Christ.

Given the nutrition and hardship of those days and the smaller heights of the Semitic peoples, generally, Mary was probably shorter and quite slender. Yet thanks to her faith and her devotion to motherhood, Mary was certainly a towering presence in her oldest son's life. Every so often, we hear about moms who, in an adrenalin rush, lift entire refrigerators or pick up the front or back of a car in order to save the life of a child—their child. Touched by the grace of God with immense spiritual fortitude and strength, Mary in her own way moved mountains to protect her son from peril and raise him up in a positive way that helped fit him to be our savior. How much do we have to think about it to realize that we truly owe Mary a huge debt of gratitude?

Today, we live in a world of impermanence and expedience. Everything is in flux. Nothing seems reliable. Sadly, many of our human relationships are negatively impacted. Trust is in short supply. Duty and commitment are almost dirty words or forgotten concepts. So many relationships are treated as disposable. The consequences are evident everywhere. Half of all marriages continue to end in divorce. All too many folks today never get married in the first place. Families are more fragile. Kids don't feel as if

they can rely on their parents. Never have folks been so materially well-off yet so confused about basic values. In the midst of all this life-shattering turmoil, compounded by our Covid-19 Pandemic, the example of Mary, mother of Jesus, reminds us that there is another way to live in which love, faith, responsibility, and commitment prevail.

Mary didn't have a graduate degree in psychology, nor a library of self-help books to steer her through life. Given the limits on opportunities for women of her day, she might not even have been particularly literate or well-educated in the schooled sense. Yet she had an abiding faith in God, clear values, a big heart, and a desire to be a good mother. On these bases alone, she did wonderful things.

As Christ's disciples, we don't have to give ourselves over to a worship of Mary as some might do. Given our Protestant theology and outlook, that would be idolatry. But we are only being foolish and narrow-minded if we cannot appreciate Mary as an enduring symbol of positive faith and parenting. Mary exemplifies the capacity of human beings to put the needs of others ahead of our self-gratification. This is what being a Christian is all about. One of our greatest challenges as Christians today lie in recovering for our lives the virtues of faith and love that Mary demonstrated in abundance.

Back in the 1970s a crazy man did indeed come close to destroying one of the most beautiful symbols of a woman's faith and a mother's love ever created by human hands. But not even a sledgehammer can destroy the real thing—the real bond between a woman and God and a mother and her child. On this Mother's Day, may we remember, cherish, and celebrate a woman's faith and a mother's love. May each of us, men and women alike, true to Mary's example, always strive to be God's faithful servants and loving, devoted parents. **Amen.**