

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Sometimes I think we, as modern day Lutherans, are scared of Mary. Maybe not scared in the “creature lurking in the shadows to ambush us” type of scared. But more...I think we often don't know what to do with her, we're not really sure what the “correct” way to feel about her is and that uncertainty makes us anxious and so we cover that anxiety by...kind of trying to say as little about her as possible, outside of Christmastime. Because if we avoid talking about her, we won't accidentally say the wrong thing, right? And we hope instead that the subject gets changed to something like Grace or God's love or some other “more Lutheran” topic that we feel more comfortable engaging in. It's like we convinced ourselves that talking about Mary for prolonged periods of time is an *inherently* Catholic thing to do, and if we say too many nice things about her at once, someone will scurry over and tell us we are doing Lutheranism Wrong and sorry but they're going to have to revoke your Lutheranism. And the more I think about it, the sillier that idea seems, but it being silly doesn't take away from this being a very widespread anxiety. Which is a shame because Mama Mary is so cool and if you let that fear get in the way of getting to know her, you're really missing out.

I think this is the point where at least one or two of you are starting to shift around uncomfortably and start worrying that I've gone rouge and am preaching “catholic things.” So first I want to say that, while I'm clearly not catholic, they do have a lot of very neat things that are very interesting to explore and avoiding entire theological topics purely because the Catholic Church likes them is generally not a great way to go about living out your faith. We love the Catholics in the room. But what I'm talking about today is *Lutheran* theology and *Lutheran* beliefs surrounding Mary. So don't worry, everybody is going to get to be a little uncomfortable today!

I want you to know, first and foremost that honoring Mary is not, and has never been “off limits” to Lutherans, the idea that revering her is somehow anti-Lutheran is *nonsense*. So how then did we get to this point, where so many Lutherans are under the impression that any kind of recognition of her outside the Christmas season is not ok? Well over the years we took some of Luther's teachings and kind of slowly started to overly simplify them, removing all nuance to the extent that we almost entirely lost the point he was making. And let's be

clear here, this isn't me *interpreting* Luther's words in a pro-Mary way. I'm taking his words at face value. Martin Luther, who claimed "the veneration of Mary is inscribed on the very depths of the human heart," and again that Mary is the "highest woman and noblest gem in Christianity after Christ...she is nobility wisdom and holiness personified. We can never honor her enough." And there's a bunch of other quoteable quotes from him I could pull in, but I think those two are enough to feel secure that Luther is on board with honoring her, yeah?

In that second quote though he goes on to outline a bit of nuance that is a little more distinctly Lutheran. "We can never honor her enough. Still honor and praise must be given to her in such a way as to injure neither Christ nor the Scriptures." Because Luther was really concerned about this pattern he saw during his time and worried that people were unintentionally being misled. He didn't see that people praying about Mary or even praying *to* Mary was a bad thing—he himself did both *all the time*. No his problem was people praying to Mary because they thought they either they themselves or the contents of their prayers weren't important enough to "bother" God with. There was this idea, especially amongst working class people that their petitions were too petty, and their standing too low to bring before the throne of heaven. "Jesus is very busy, he doesn't have time to deal with...whatever it is you want." Which led to this idea that you, lowly commoner should turn to his mom instead, she too was once poor and powerless, she gets you. She'll take your concerns seriously and she will act as a mediator for you and bring your concerns to God on your behalf. And I want to be clear, this isn't quite what the Catholic Church was teaching either now or in the 1500's. But it was what a lot of working class people who couldn't read or write *thought* was being taught.

And this brought Luther a *lot* of stress. He felt Mary should be revered and honored and adored by Christians, not because she was going to bully God into paying attention to us—you had God's full attention already—no we should love and celebrate Mary because we love God. Because we are so extraordinarily happy that God became flesh and lived among us, and the only reason he was able to do that was because this one poor and powerless and frail teenager living under military occupation who yearned so deeply for a better future, trusted God so completely that she didn't even hesitate to partner with God on this plan.

And it was a partnership. Mary is not an empty vessel in this. She signs up. She looks the arch angel Gabriel right in their too many eyes and says "Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Let's do this God,

you and me, you're asking a lot but if this is what it takes, I'm in. And if anyone ever tries to convince you that Mary didn't play a significant role in shaping Jesus' theology, they're a fool. He taught his disciples to pray, and in so doing he echoes his mom's earlier sentiment "...thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is heaven." Jesus cared for everyone, yes, even Judas who he knew would betray him. But he showed a particular tenderness to the poor, to women in general and widows in particular. Because Jesus *loved* his mom and witnessed first-hand the ways she'd struggle in this world, she who was poor her whole life, and who was widowed sometime before Jesus reached adulthood. I wonder sometimes how many of Jesus' actions came about because the person in front of him reminded him of his mom.

A mob dragging a woman forward to stone her to death because she was caught in adultery. Mary should have been stoned to death by a mob too, when she became pregnant out of wedlock, the only reason she wasn't is Joseph intervened. Did he picture his mom's face when he saw the terror in that woman's eyes? When he witnessed Jairus receive news that his 12 year old daughter had died, did he think of Mary's future anguish when she witnessed his own death? When a poor widow placed a single penny into the treasury, did he recall what a sacrifice that was for Mary, how much work saving and scrounging his own widowed mama would have had to do to make a sacrifice like that?

But Mary taught him actively too. We can see that in her song we sang today. Of how God will cast aside the powerful from their thrones and lift up the lowly. Jesus begins his public ministry by reading from the scroll of Isaiah in his home synagogue "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" and declares that day scripture has been fulfilled in him. Mary sings of how God will fill the starving with good things, and years later her son will look at a hungry crowd of *thousands* and his disciples will tell him to send them away but he says "oh absolutely not" and he produces enough food for them all. Mama sings of how the rich will be left with empty hands, and Pilate and all the temple authorities gape as the tomb, a brief symbol of their victory, stands empty. Mama sings of how God remembers them with mercy according to the promises of old. And her son walks this earth healing what is broken and tending to those who suffer. Yes, Jesus' actions were foretold in the Magnificat, but that's

in part because the author of that song was one of his earliest teachers. Of course Mary deserves our adoration. Just think of where we'd all be without her.

Lutheran teaching was *never* supposed to confiscate Mary from us. Jesus shares all things with us, which necessarily includes his own brave determined and loving mother. You can consider her your own mama too, you're not breaking any rules if you do. Luther just wanted to make sure you didn't stop there. As he put it "One should honor Mary as she herself wished and as she expressed it in the Magnificat. She praised God for his deeds. How then can we praise her? The true honor of Mary is the honor of God, the praise of God's grace.. .Mary is nothing for the sake of herself, but for the sake of Christ...Mary does not wish that we come to her, but through her to God."

So today we honor Mary, mother of us all. A tenacious and merciful young woman who partnered with God, who birthed God, suckled God, and taught him to walk. Who kissed God's boo boos and told him how very loved he was. Who knew God in his most vulnerable state. Who once held God's presence inside her own body. And fled to far off countries to keep God safe. Who sat her son down and taught him all about his Father in heaven and the way his Father would have him act. Who wailed as she watched God suffer and die before her eyes. All of this done through some insignificant no one from nowhere. Mary, Queen of Heaven, simultaneously Jesus' first teacher and first disciple. And today we say "Oh thank you mama!" And she grins and says "Thank you babies, but God did this, I just helped."

And, despite common misconceptions on the subject, as Lutherans we believe we can pray these words with confidence, mediating as we do so on the grace God bestowed upon Mary and all the wondrous things God did through her. And while we do that we boldly pray "Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with thee; blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus Christ. Amen!"