

## Sermon – Mother’s Day – St Mary’s Lake Ronkonkoma

### John 14: 1-14

I met Zorka Millich at a cocktail party in the spring of 2012, at the home of one of my professors from General Seminary. During our conversation Zorka Millich told me that she had written a book called the *Oral History of Centenarian Women in Montenegro*. Her book immediately piqued my interest. I had by then become interested in the wisdom of women of this age especially women from indigenous backgrounds. Montenegro is in the Balkans in Eastern Europe and is a tribal, warrior and patriarchal society. My fascination rested with how these women survived, and indeed, how they raised their families against the background of conflict.

I was also interested in oral history, the process of recording social and cultural memory through the telling of life stories. I’d first been introduced to oral history when working in Sydney in an inner-city community. The oral histories of the older inhabitants of the area were being recorded before they were lost in a haze of gentrification that was descending.

Winston Churchill said, “History is written by the victors” but this often negates the meaningful testimony of those that might not be winners but have an equal right to tell their story, their truth. So I bought Zorka’s book and have been fascinated to read the lives of these centenarian women.

These women, like so many women of patriarchal societies, were never wanted as baby girls. Parents birthing girls felt immense shame, especially if they weren’t able to conceive boys. Boys were the honored children that would eventually marry girls who would then look after their aging parents. Girls would leave their birth family and through marriage take up residence with their new kin.

There is a paradox here. Girls were in fact needed as much, or more than boys, as the boys needed to marry, their offspring needed nurturing and the family needed a strong woman to keep it together when the men went off to war, which happened frequently. The men also were likely to die early.

The stories of these women bare testimony to lives lived in almost constant struggle. One, the 103-year-old Petranica said, “*I cannot say anything except that my life was hard. I suffered when I was little, I suffered when I grew up. Oh, what I think of what I lived through! The best thing is to forget about it. But when you ask me, I have to tell you. There is nothing that I can say that is good. None of the men spoke much to the women. We did not eat with the men. Most of them never sat down, even to eat. Now you know how much we suffered, and how hard it is here.*”

Tragedy and suffering are often firmly interwoven with joy and happiness in family life. A mother’s life becomes a rich tapestry of human endeavor. Before I was ordained I was a hospital chaplain at Morgan Stanley Children’s Hospital at Columbia Medical Center in New York. Two of the units that I worked in were the anti-partum unit and the neonatal ICU. During my time there I entered the lives of many women who were either experiencing difficult pregnancies or the birth of a premature or very ill child. Often these moms and dads had to endure immense sadness especially when their child died but many also experienced the healing of their child, which filled them with immense relief and joy. For some mothers the pain of their child’s death was too great for them and they just wanted nothing more than to forget what had just happened in their lives.

I am sure you could tell me your own story about the joys and difficult struggles in your life. But we often shy away from telling our most emotional stories preferring to keep them private, especially the painful ones. Maybe we feel immense sadness, maybe we feel ashamed or maybe we need to be assured that the listener can be trusted with these truths. It is important that we tell our stories though, that we share the joy and sorrow of living in this world. Our stories are wisdom and we need to know that we are not alone in the things that we experience. We are together here in community, the new family in the church, and we can, and indeed should, share our stories of faith and life.

Today and on the second Sunday of May each year we celebrate the women in our lives that have mothered us in some way or those that have stepped in to nurture and care for us. Much of the publicity for this day is focused on gifts and celebratory lunches that we give to honor these women and the nurturers in our lives. We can though often forget to remember the women and men that have lost babies or children for which this day is painful. Sadness and joy are two emotional strands woven together that form the rich fabric of our life experience.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, was a woman whose life was also woven from these two strands. At the Annunciation Mary experienced the joy of saying yes to the angels and permitting herself to be the vessel of God's incarnation. "Here I am, the servant of the Lord" Mary said "let it be with me according to your word." Mary's joy is recorded in her prayer of thanks, the Magnificat, found in the gospel according to St Luke. "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior," she begins.

Max Thurian in his book *Mary, Mother of the Lord Figure of the Church* says that she "quivers with this ineffable delight in the presence of God who comes at last to inhabit the earth in order to save people. [Mary] also pre-figures the eschatological delight of the Church which, with all the creation, will one day behold the return in glory of the Risen Lord."<sup>1</sup>

Mary's life was changed when she became a mother to Jesus. Mary's humanity was a part of Jesus humanity in a similar way to how Jesus reflected the divinity of God his Father. Children are often a reflection of their biological parents and those that create the nurturing environment in which they are raised. As children we are the product of 'otherness.' By this I mean that no matter where we come from we grow by means of our experience with others. Their desires bear on us, their habits bear on us and their waywardness bears on us.

A mother's life also changes as her children bear on her. Mary was no exception with her life forever changed by her relationship with Jesus. She was to experience the joy of birthing and raising this exceptional gift from God but she was also to experience the immense pain of witnessing the subjection of her son to the forces of state power that ended his life on the cross. Mary's motherhood was to bear sacrifice. Jesus destiny to return to God involves for Mary 'detachment and suffering .... Her human motherhood will only be mortified despite the joys, and the wonders, which her divine motherhood will involve for her.'<sup>2</sup> However her sadness was overcome with fear and joy when she, along with Mary Magdalene, encountered her son raised to new life.

As we grow our true freedom is made possible when we come to understand which 'other' most determines our desires. For Mary, and for us, it was when God's loving desire came to dwell in us through Christ. It is at that moment that we begin to become free from our slavish adherence to the desires of all others that press in on us. To some extent we grow away from our mothers and those that raised us, as we take on Jesus Christ and like Jesus we come to

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<sup>1</sup> Thurian, Max *Mary Mother of the Lord Figure of the Church* The Faith Press, London 1963 p 87

<sup>2</sup> Ibid p97

understand that our family is broader than our biological kin. Our family becomes the body of Christ and as John says in the gospel reading for today there are many dwelling places for us.

Jesus becomes the way to this new family. For Mary, Jesus was indeed the way, the truth and the life. He changed her life forever. As the earthly mother to Jesus, Mary becomes the mother to the body of Christ in which we all live. Mary experienced radiance and joy when she was blessed with a child but this was mixed with sadness when her child was crucified. Joy again filled the world when Jesus defeated death and rose to new life revealing to us the true path toward salvation.

Today we celebrate our mothers and those that have nurtured and raised us. Today also, and indeed for the whole month of May, we remember the Blessed Mary, the namesake of this 150 year old community here in beautiful Lake Ronkonkoma. We remember the example Mary set for us by saying yes to God and agreeing to walk the way of Jesus her son, onward toward Calvary and to a new life shaped by him. We pray Blessed Mary will bring comfort to all mothers who will mourn today and we remember that life is a rich mixture of both joy and suffering.

May Jesus and his mother Mary, along with our nurturing role models, be for you the ‘others’ that shape your life both today and in the days ahead.

May you all share in a blessed day.