

THE APPLE DIDN'T FALL FAR FROM THE TREE:
MEETING THE WOMAN WHO FORMED THE LORD

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For Marcos Martins

Without whom this journey would not have been possible.

ABSTRACT

THE APPLE DIDN'T FALL FAR FROM THE TREE:

MEETING THE WOMAN WHO FORMED THE LORD

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The woman who speaks more words than any other woman in the New Testament is mute in most Protestant churches. She is the unfortunate victim of a church fight that is more than 500 years old.

My journey with Mary began with a mystical encounter at a shrine in Brazil. It has become a personal and theological journey with and toward the mother of the Lord. This strikes some people as odd and perhaps it is, but it is my Protestant faith that has propelled me deeper into this journey. For example, how can so-called “people of the Book” ignore the rich theology found in scriptural passages about Mary? What about Mary the prophet, the theologian and the very first person to believe the Good News about Jesus of Nazareth?

In my studies, I have discovered that I am not alone. Mary has been making a come-back among the Protestants since the 1960s. What happened to me has happened to other children of the Reformation. Are any of them in my congregation?

During the four Wednesdays of Advent 2012, I taught a course entitled “There’s something about Mary” to approximately sixteen persons. A survey was completed by most of those persons beforehand to gauge their level of knowledge and interest in Mary. The four weeks were divided as follows: Mary in the Bible, Mary in Eastern Orthodoxy, Mary during the Protestant Reformation, and Mary among the modern day Protestants. Another survey was completed afterwards by seven of the persons who had completed the first survey. The results are included here and form the basis of my conclusions.

I also preached a sermon on the topic to the entire congregation on February 3, 2013. Approximately 40 persons participated in focus groups that immediately followed the sermon. Those results are included here as well.

What I discovered along the way is that while each spiritual journey is unique, there are others in my congregation who identify closely with the Protestant tradition and yet are eager to meet and know this woman who formed the Lord.

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CHAPTER 1

A PERSONAL AND CORPORATE JOURNEY TOWARD MARY

At first glance, I should never have been drawn to Marian devotion. I was raised in the Pentecostal/Holiness tradition of the American south, was ordained in the United Methodist Church and now serve as a pastor in the United Church of Christ. These changes in affiliation mirror significant changes in my spiritual perspective. My journey has been toward openness in understanding the ways that God speaks to humankind through the varieties of religious experience. On this spiritual journey, no change has been more surprising for me than my interest in and subsequent devotion to the Virgin Mary.

Like most other Protestants, I knew Mary as a character in the birth narratives of Jesus. In the conservative theology of my early childhood, her virginal status was seen as a fulfillment of prophecy and as a sign of Jesus's unique nature. But that was as far as the interest in Mary ever went. I instinctively understood this silence to be an expression of the anti-Catholic bias regularly preached in my church. Since Catholics "worship Mary" and "pray to her," we were encouraged to eschew any practice or thinking that might be labeled "Catholic." The result was not only the perpetuation of a shameful anti-Catholic bigotry, but also a severely underdeveloped sense of the importance of Mary in the life of the Lord. It also diminished the idea of Jesus's full humanity. Ours was an underdeveloped and lopsided Incarnational theology based on what Beverly Gaventa

calls “a Protestant conspiracy of silence (about Mary): theologically, liturgically and devotionally.”¹

Later on as a seminary student, more complex thinking about Mary did come to the fore, but it was mostly concerned with church history and creedal statements about the veracity of the virginal conception. For the first time in my life I confronted questions like: was a literal reading of the birth narratives “necessary for salvation?” Did it really matter how Mary became pregnant with Jesus? While entertaining new possibilities of interpretation, I was unwilling to dismiss the miraculous out-of-hand. I remain so today. The Pentecostalism that formed me instilled in me a belief that God could do the impossible. Why should the miracle of virginal conception be any more difficult to believe than any other miracle?

More recently, and especially in regard to this research, I have come to value the idea of the Virgin Birth as part of the vital language of ecumenism, grounded in the creeds of the church and providing a common starting point from which to develop dialogue with other Christians across the globe and across theological spectra. This seems especially important in my denominational context. A lively ecumenism is a core value of the United Church of Christ, the motto of which is based on the prayer of Jesus in John 17: “...that they may all be one.” Given that Mary is such a pivotal character in the drama of salvation for millions of Catholic and Orthodox Christians, how can we not be proficient in the same ecumenical language? As Gaventa states: “... for Christians who are involved in ecumenical discussions, the need to find and claim common ground with other Christians sparks a willingness to listen to the language of the other traditions

¹ David Van Biema, "Hail, Mary." *Time*, March 21, 2005, www.time.com (accessed July 27, 2013).

(e.g., the Immaculate Conception) and reinterpret that language in ways congenial to one's own tradition.”²

My journey toward Mary has taken on an intellectual bent for the purposes of this thesis, but its genesis was experiential, devotional and intensely personal. In 2004, on an annual trip to Brazil, my Brazilian spouse and I made a pilgrimage to the city of Aparecida, in São Paulo State, where the largest Marian shrine in the world has been under construction for more than five decades. The huge basilica is devoted to the patron saint of Brazil, Nossa Senhora Aparecida (Our Lady of Aparecida or Our Lady “Who Appeared”) and was built to house the image of the Virgin that tradition says was discovered in the nets of some fisherman in October 1717. Once inside, we wound our way in the line for a glimpse of the image. As we waited to see this object of veneration, I was keenly aware of my discomfort and of being emotionally removed from the experience. Mine was a quiet but active resistance to the expressions of Catholic faith that I witnessed all around me. I felt like a Protestant outsider.

The statue itself is rather unimpressive. It is quite small, made of dark wood with features that are barely distinguishable, and is out-of-reach behind some protective glass. I was rather underwhelmed. Others were not. The statue evoked multiple displays of devotion from many of the pilgrims. People touched the wall that housed the image. Others dropped to their knees in supplication. Some raised their hands in prayer. Behind me, my spouse began to pray quietly and to weep. Even though he now identifies as Protestant, I understood the reason for the depth and intensity of his prayer to Nossa

² Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Mary Glimpses of the Mother of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 18.

Senhora Aparecida. His mother had been recently diagnosed with terminal cancer. I joined him in his prayer for his mother's well-being despite my conflicted feelings about where we were and through whom our intercessions were being made. Perhaps it was out of my own concern for his mother, or my love for him, but that moment became electrified for me. It was a mystical experience of the same sort that I had been accustomed to in the Pentecostal church of my childhood. Like John Wesley at Aldersgate, "I *felt* my heart *strangely* warmed"³ (emphasis mine) in this most unlikely place. My concern for my spouse and his mother seemed to morph into an intense connection to the mother of the Lord; a sense that she could offer assistance to us; and a deep sense of peace. I understood myself to be in the presence of the holy. And so it was that my unwitting journey with Mary began.

Since then, my interest in Mary as a special connection to or doorway into the divine has grown. I wonder what her place in the communion of saints is. Does she intercede for me and others? To explore these questions, I began to practice some traditional Marian devotion. As a centering point, I use an icon of Nossa Senhora Aparecida that was commissioned for me in honor of the 20th anniversary of my ordination (see Appendix 1).

This icon, like all icons, is an interpretation of a deeper spiritual reality and is designed to be a portal into and a conversation with that reality. Each detail contains layers of meaning that are revealed more fully with time and prayerful attention.

³ John Wesley, *The Journals of John Wesley: A Selection*, ed. Elizabeth Jay (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987) quoted in Bradley P. Holt, *Thirsty for God – A Brief History of Christian Spirituality* (Fortress Press, 2005), 123.

In the case of this icon, the artist Ian Knowles's imagination was necessary, for as he points out, the statue on which this icon is based is "quite crude and simple."⁴ The facial features are almost impossible to distinguish. The challenge of this "blank canvas" gave the iconographer the freedom to create a face for Nossa Senhora Aparecida. The result is a marvelous mix of indigenous, African and European traits. Thus, Our Lady is the "every woman" of Brazil.

In this icon Nossa Senhora Aparecida is dressed in white to symbolize her purity and in blue, the color of divinity, to symbolize her own enfleshment of the divine. Her mantle is the traditional deep red or purple of the Byzantine empress, thus imbuing this very traditional Latin image with an element of the Eastern iconographic tradition. Two flags are visible on the inside of the mantle, the Papal flag and the flag of Brazil. Mary is pregnant with Jesus and this is indicated by the sash tied around her waist, similar to the sash found on representations of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Instead of standing on cherubs and clouds, as is traditional, Nossa Senhora Aparecida stands on the waves, connecting her to the miraculous events that surrounded her discovery by fisherman. A peacock bass, a native Brazilian fish, leaps from the waters under her feet. The fish commemorates the feeding of the multitudes. The choice of a peacock bass also harks back to the peacock as a symbol of the Resurrection. The icon is executed on American Walnut in egg tempura and with 23 ½ carat gold leaf.⁵

The crown that rests upon her head is not painted like the rest of the image. Instead, it is hammered into the gold leaf. It is clearly seen and yet, somehow quite

⁴ Ian Knowles, letter to Dean Sheehan, Holy Week, 2011.

⁵ Ibid.

separate from the rest of the painting. It is as if she wears a crown of which she is not fully aware. Is it because her exaltation was a heavenly event and not an earthly one? Is it her crown alone or is the crown that hovers over her head a symbol of the crown promised to all those who, like her, do the will of God? ("For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother." Mark 3:35)

Using this icon as a focal point, I have incorporated the recitation of the "Hail Mary" as part of my devotional life. While this would undoubtedly strike many Congregationalists as odd, I am strangely comforted by this prayer. The words help me to focus on my own humanity, via the humanity of Mary and Jesus. The phrase "... and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus" grounds Jesus the Christ firmly in the very human experience of gestation and birth. Because Mary carried the Holy One in her womb, she is a potent symbol for humanity's call and ability to bear God into the world *through our bodies*. Mary teaches us that holiness has physicality. Mary shows us, by her willingness and humility, the way to a more fully incarnational expression of our own faith in Jesus. She invites us to consider those ways in which Christ might be born in our own flesh and blood.

The Hail Mary also serves to direct my attention, ultimately, to Jesus. In the words "... and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus," Jesus becomes the central focus and goal of the prayer, despite the fact that it is addressed to Mary. The comma causes a pause in the breathing that refocuses me on the Savior. Thus the prayer so centered on Mary actually turns the worshipper back to Christ.

Henri Nouwen makes this point in referencing his own devotion to the icon of the Virgin of Vladimir. He writes that the contemplation of the image “gathers everything into an invitation to worship.” (Although it is an image of the Virgin)... it says:

Praise Jesus, thank Jesus, glorify Jesus, ask from Jesus, plead with Jesus, and always, always pray to Jesus. But it says all of this in the way a mother speaks to her children, not forcing them, but creating a space for them where they can find in themselves the desire for this unceasing worship.⁶

This is my rather surprising spiritual journey. Like anyone else who has had a spiritual awakening, I want to share it with others. But is it appropriate to do so in a liberal Protestant church? Does the subject matter have any organic connection to the people who are Broadway United Church of Christ? Are there any others like me? Does learning more about Mary meet a real need in my community or am I simply foisting a personal interest onto them for the purposes of this project? These were the questions that guided my research and the implementation of my project.

In many ways, Broadway United Church of Christ, an urban congregation in the heart of Manhattan, is a typical congregation of the United Church of Christ. Many of the congregants are educated, socially progressive, liturgically traditional and open-minded. They are intellectually curious and eager to learn. Would this predilection toward an open mind be a portal to share what I had learned? Would my experience speak to some of them? I hoped so.

However, as I began to reveal the details of my project, I was surprised by the firmness of their Protestant identity and thus the assumption by some that Mary belonged

⁶ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Behold the Beauty of the Lord – Praying with Icons* (Ave Maria Press, 1987), 36.

to the Catholics. I experienced an anti-Catholic sentiment at the very first meeting of my Lay Advisory Team. Several people spoke passionately about their negative perceptions of Catholicism. One member expressed that just reading my prospectus made him angry. Quite frankly, this caught me off guard.

Despite that first meeting with the LAT (Lay Advisory Team), I pressed on, reminding myself that it was not my job to convince the people of anything. It was my job to join them in storytelling and to look for possible connections.

This underlying principle of narrative research goes hand in hand with the functional responsibility of the pastor in the Congregationalist tradition. We have “teaching authority” but not legislative authority. The people expect the clergy to be educated and to share that specialized knowledge with them. Teaching the people about Mary fit nicely into that framework. Additionally, Congregationalists believe in the absolute freedom of the pulpit. The minister is free to teach and preach whatever she believes is the truth without fear of censure (at least in theory). The people are not bound to believe a single word of it, but they will defend the preacher’s right to say it. I relied on that promise.

I began to make my case by appealing to a commonly held core value. Broadway United Church of Christ is deeply committed to the place and ministry of women. This commitment is firmly rooted in our Congregationalist tradition and in this congregation’s history. The Congregationalists ordained Antoinette Brown in 1853. It was an astonishing move making Brown “...the first woman since New Testament times ordained as a Christian minister, and perhaps the first woman in history elected to serve a

Christian congregation as pastor.”⁷ Broadway Tabernacle (later renamed Broadway United Church of Christ) ordained its first woman in 1928.⁸ This congregation’s commitment to the ministry of women has continued unabated in the decades since then. Would this commitment and core value be a natural connection to the idea of Mary as “first disciple” or Mary as a prophet in her own right?

Second, as people of the Reformed tradition, we look to the Word of God in Scripture to support our historic commitments and values, including the ministry of women. While there is some evidence of the ministry of women in the early Jesus movement and early church, Mary provides what is perhaps the strongest biblical example of that ministry. If the Bible could be used to demonstrate this, would that be persuasive to the project’s participants?

It is interesting to note the Marian interest clearly evident in the larger denomination of the United Church of Christ. Anecdotal evidence suggests that “as many as forty percent of recent newcomers (to the UCC) were raised in the Roman Catholic tradition. Large numbers of seminary students with Catholic backgrounds are also preparing for ordination in the UCC.”⁹ How do their history and/or Marian devotion influence our united and *uniting* (and thus ever-changing) denomination? Is any of that influence active in the former Catholic members of my congregation?

⁷ "UCC 'Firsts'," ucc.org. <http://www.ucc.org/about-us/old-firsts.html> (accessed July 16, 2013).

⁸ Wade Arnold, “Historically Progressive,” www.broadwayucc.org, <http://broadwayucc.org/historically-progressive/history/> (accessed December 7, 2013).

⁹ J. Mary Luti and Andrew B. Warner, *Catholics in the United Church of Christ* (UCC Writer’s Group, 2008), 2.

Surprising Marian language is found in the liturgy and hymnody of the United Church of Christ. While its inclusion may have had its genesis in the liturgical renewal, ecumenical and feminist movements of the late 20th century, it stands today also as a symbol of a growing interest in Mary among Protestants based largely on their reading of the Bible.¹⁰

A poignant example of Marian language and theology is found in the hymn “Mary, Woman of the Promise” included in the *New Century Hymnal* of the United Church of Christ. In it the mother of the Lord is portrayed as a fulfiller of the promises of God. That is not an unusual idea for many Protestants. Verses two and three, however, approach a fully developed Marian devotional piety: “Mary, song of holy wisdom, sung before the world began: faithful to the Word within you, as you bore God’s wondrous plan. Mary, morning star of justice; mirror of the Radiant Light: in the shadows of life’s journey, be a beacon for our sight.”¹¹ What does it mean for the children of the Puritans to sing *to* Mary, invoking her with phrases like “song of holy wisdom;” “morning star of justice;” “mirror of the Radiant light” and “beacon for our sight?”

The baptismal liturgy of the UCC also elevates the significance of Mary’s role in the salvation of the world. In the litany for the blessing of the baptismal waters, God’s mighty acts in creation are proclaimed: God’s Spirit brooding over the waters at creation; the waters of the flood washing the earth during the time of Noah; Moses leading the Hebrew people through the waters of the Red Sea. But then the liturgy makes a

¹⁰ Van Biema, *Hail Mary*, 2.

¹¹ Mary Frances Fleischaker, “Mary, Woman of the Promise” in *The New Century Hymnal* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1995), 123.

surprising turn toward amniotic water and proclaims: “In the fullness of time, you sent Jesus Christ, who was nurtured in the water of Mary’s womb.”¹² Mary’s womb and amniotic water, then, become a location for the “mighty acts of God.”

Mary is already among us via our religious demographics, liturgy and history. Mary fits nicely into our core values supporting and celebrating the ministry and contributions of women. Marian theology can be drawn from the book that Protestants call “a sufficient guide for faith and practice.” Therefore, is there a more prominent place for Mary in the theological and liturgical life at Broadway United Church of Christ? In a congregation in which our language about God is carefully considered in order to represent both female and male attributes, can Mary serve as a conduit of sorts for our Protestant longing for connection to the feminine in the Divine? Can a developed Marian theology further illuminate the place and contributions of women in the earliest church? Can she help us to connect more fully (and honestly) to the humanity of Jesus? What can she teach us about Incarnational theology; about carrying God around in our flesh and bones in this 21st century? Was she a wisdom teacher and prophet in her own right? If so, are her words worthy of special consideration? Do we hear any of her words in the words of Jesus? Did anyone ever say of Jesus “the apple didn’t fall very far from the tree?” These were the questions that guided the four-week course that I taught during Advent 2012 and the sermon and focus groups that were offered in February 2013.

¹² *Book of Worship: United Church of Christ (loose-Leaf)* (New York: United Church of Christ Office, 1986), 141.

CHAPTER 2

THE PROCESS, PART 1

The Advent 2012 class entitled “There’s Something About Mary” had approximately sixteen participants and was divided as follows:

1. Week One: What does the Bible Say (or not!) about Mary?
2. Week Two: Mary in the Eastern Orthodox tradition; Praying *with* Icons of Mary
3. Week Three: Marian Devotion and the Reformation
4. Week Four: Mary Among the Protestants

Of the sixteen who participated, a core group of approximately ten people were at all the classes and of those ten, seven persons completed both the “before” and “after” surveys. The surveys were distributed via Survey Monkey, an online service. They required essay-style answers and were purposefully anonymous. That anonymity proved to be an obstacle later on as I tried to compare answers and gauge any changes in thinking. Not all I.P. addresses matched, indicating that some people had used different computers to complete each survey. In those cases, I was able to make matches based on other factors (unique writing style, references to personal history, etc.). Additionally, while the essay answers were interesting, their subjectivity made them difficult to measure. If I were to do this project again, I would use an identifying characteristic (like an assigned number for each participant) and would include some multiple choice and true/false questions in order to have more easily measureable data.

The before survey was designed to gauge the level of knowledge of and interest in Mary. I assumed that most of the participants would have minimal knowledge about her, but I was surprised by how much people already knew. Many of my members are well-read and knowledgeable about the faith of others.

What follows is a brief description of each participant as well as their answers to the survey questions.

- Participant A: Female, 51, works for disaster relief organization, raised United Methodist
- Participant B: Female, 40s, college professor, raised Serbian Orthodox
- Participant C: Female, 60, professional tutor, raised Unitarian Universalist
- Participant D: Female, mid 50s, professional singer/song writer, raised United Church of Christ
- Participant E: Female, 41, works in a corporate environment, raised United Church of Christ
- Participant F: Female, early 60s, retired, raised Roman Catholic
- Participant G: Female, mid 40s, college professor, raised United Church of Christ

1. What is your understanding of the role of Mary, the mother of Jesus?

Participant A

“I understand Mary as the physical and spiritual mother of Jesus, mostly as a man (and perhaps in terms of his divinity not so much). I see her as the person who birthed him and nurtured him and helped to make him who he was, like most mothers.”

Participant B

“Being the mother of Jesus”

Participant C

“That she was a simple woman with a good heart”

Participant D

“Too big a question to answer”

Participant E

“She said, OK, essentially, at the Annunciation and she raised him to adulthood.”

Participant F

“I was brought up Catholic in a Polish environment. She had a prominent role in our worship. Processions, pilgrimages, days of worship, etc.”

Participant G

“She was part of the fulfillment of prophecy – “A virgin shall be with child...” She and her cousin Elizabeth were both chosen by God to play important roles in the salvation of mankind. They both received this news through visitations by the angel Gabriel to Elizabeth’s husband Zacharias (sic) and to Mary herself.”

2. Besides the birth narratives, are you familiar with other biblical references to Mary? If so, what are they?

Participant A

“Mary at the cross, Mary in the Temple with Jesus, Mary with Jesus when he turned water into wine”

Participant B

“Mary the faithful”

Participant C

“No, I am not”

Participant D

“Mary at the crucifixion... was Mary at the tomb when the stone was rolled away? I get the maries (sic) confused.”

Participant E

“At the wedding at Cana, she nudged him to help them out when they ran out of wine. Once when he was teaching, she and various sibs came looking to speak to him, and he wouldn’t interrupt himself to see her.

Participant F

“No”

Participant G

“There is the story of Joseph and Mary searching for Jesus on their return from Jerusalem and ultimately returning to Jerusalem and finding him in the temple. Mary is at the wedding in Cana when Jesus turns water into wine. She is also at the cross throughout the crucifixion.”

3. What do you know about the use of icons? Have you ever had an experience with them?

Participant A

“I love icons and think they are very helpful in focusing my heart and mind when trying to meditate or pray. I have used them for years since (being) exposed to them by the Dominican sisters I used to work with, and enjoy praying with them (that’s how I think of it) when I go on retreat to Catholic/Episcopal monasteries.”

Participant B

“Yes. They were constituent of my growing up in a Serbian Orthodox Christian family.”

Participant C

“No. What is an icon exactly?”

Participant D

“Not much. But I am married into a Greek-American family, and have seen a few on funeral cards and in Greece.”

Participant E

“I know that Orthodox people use these images with impassive expressions to try to feel tranquility. I’ve seen icons, but not prayed with them.”

Participant F

“Matka Boska Czestochowa (Black Madonna)”

Participant G

“I know they are artistic representations of saints which people use in their prayers and meditations. These are often found in churches as paintings, sculptures and stained glass.”

4. How do you understand the phrase “God-bearer” or “Mother of God?”

Participant A

“I understand it to mean that Mary was the vessel who birthed God on earth in Jesus, although I tend to think of her more as the mother of Jesus as a human than as a God.”

Participant B

“Not too sure I understand it”

Participant C

“Have no understanding of this phrase”

Participant D

“I don’t”

Participant E

“God-bearer” sounds like rent-a-womb, whereas “Mother of God” sounds rather holy herself.”

Participant F

“Mother of the Son of God”

Participant G

“In Matthew’s Gospel it says “She shall bring forth a son... call his name Emmanuel... interpreted... God with us.”

5. How would you feel about the expression of Marian devotion in a Protestant church?

Participant A

“Delighted!”

Participant B

“Not differently than in any other church.”

Participant C

“Sounds rather Roman Catholic, but no negative feeling about the expression”

Participant D

“It needs work.”

Participant E

“Sounds OK to me.”

Participant F

“Comfortable”

Participant G

“I don’t have a problem with it. Just because Catholicism places such a strong emphasis on Mary is no reason for Protestants not to embrace her as an integral figure in their worship.”

6. Do you know any or all of the Hail Mary? What associations do you make with this prayer?

Participant A

“I know some of it, and while I love the words I tend to still react to it as a “rote” recitation of words that I hear tumbling out of the mouths of people at mass without much meaning/thought.”

Participant B

“She is a blessed woman. So is her son.”

Participant C

“No. Associations – rather mindless, rather like the Om in mediation

Participant D

“Catholics, not me”

Participant E

“I like the first half very much, especially “full of grace.” Asking her to pray (intercede) for me in the second half gets my anti-Catholic and anti-idolatry hackles up.”

Participant F

“First learnt it in Polish then went to Middle and High School in England and said it daily there.”

Participant G

“Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus...” It’s a Catholic mediation repeated while holding the beads of a rosary.”

7. Do you have any personal interest in Mary? If so, please explain.

Participant A

“I have been interested in the Catholic concept of Mary for years, and most recently interested in her role as a mother and what that must have been like for her to birth and watch Jesus grow, and die the way he did.”

Participant B

“I am interested in the implied symbolic of redemption and rebirth in the Mary/Jesus nexus.”

Participant C

“Yes, being a feminist.”

Participant D

“Just trying to learn more...”

Participant E

“I’ve always admired her and been in awe of how she answered at the Annunciation. I feel that, like her, we are all asked to be bearers of God to others and to have sparks of God born through us.”

Participant F

“Yes. She’s in my soul.”

Participant G

“Yes, because I have a personal interest in Jesus and, although Mary plays a significant role in his mission and ministry, there is a not a great deal of Biblical references with which to work.”

8. How important is the person of Mary in your understanding of Advent and Christmas and why?

Participant A

“Somewhat important, though mainly because churches seem to focus so much on the story of this “innocent and probably scared young thing” chosen by God to birth Jesus... haven’t gone much deeper than that in the past.”

Participant B

“She introduces/reconfirms the endurance narrative.”

Participant C

“Important since Advent and Christmas focus on Jesus as a baby, born of a human woman.”

Participant D

“Not really there yet. Some inchoate thoughts as of now.”

Participant E

“She is important to remind us that even if we are far from home and uncomfortable, we may birth God to someone else, whether or not we’re aware that we do so.”

Participant F

“As the bearer of Jesus she is the main focus until the birth.”

Participant G

“Mary is about as central a figure to Advent and Christmas as you can get both from a historical and metaphysical standpoint. Without her the entire Christmas scenario would crumble.”

9. Do you think the congregation would benefit from further study and/or sermons about Mary? If so, in what way? If not, why not?

Participant A

“yes yes yes – she is a fascinating woman the more I get to know her and many of us need to look at her without our biases related to Catholicism and perceived “Mary worship” – she is a key to understanding the nature of Jesus, I believe.

Participant B

“Maybe, but not in the way that would conform to contemporary cultural affinities. Rather, it should inspire new ways of celebrating the Holy Spirit.

Participant C

“Absolutely, since they may be as ignorant of Mary as I am, and she is an important figure in learning about Jesus, who was both human and divine.”

Participant D

“Yes. In all ways. There is much in here we do not really know.”

Participant E

“Certainly, because our faith is supposed to be incarnational. We are supposed to be able to embody our faith to others. We, the church, are God’s body.”

Participant F

“Well as my daughter told me when she was young and going to BUCC (Broadway United Church of Christ), “There are no women.”

Participant G

“Of course, this would be a worthwhile ongoing exploration that could only benefit the congregation’s better understanding and practice of our faith.”

10. What are your thoughts about having a baptismal or Eucharistic prayer that incorporates Marian insights used in a public worship service at Broadway UCC?

Participant A

“Totally happy with this idea!”

Participant B

“For some reason, I feel the prayers at Broadway UCC do, in a way, pay homage to Mary.

Participant C

“Sounds very interesting. Let’s try it.”

Participant D

“I think it would be good, but there has to be study and understanding to prepare the minds/hearts/souls for that.”

Participant E

“Would love it”

Participant F

“Would welcome it”

Participant G

“I can see the inherent controversies that could arise by incorporating Marian insights into our baptismal and Eucharistic prayers and public worship but I consider us to be a progressive and cutting-edge congregation that would definitely benefit from such unprecedented endeavors.”

(The “after survey” questions and answers are found at the end of Chapter 6.)

THE PROCESS/PART 2

I also wanted to ask some of the same questions to as many of the adult members of the congregation as possible. To that end, I preached a sermon entitled “The Apple Didn’t Fall Far from the Tree” on Sunday, February 3, 2013 (see Appendix 2). I wrote a special liturgy that incorporated Marian references throughout (see Appendix 3). Additionally, a member of the congregation who attended the classes and is a professional musician wrote and performed a song for the occasion (see Appendix 4).

To encourage participation, the congregation had been alerted to this special service via church announcements, the monthly newsletter, the church’s list serve and Facebook page. Attendance was strong and people seemed engaged and ready to help.

After the service, approximately forty members of the congregation retired to the Fellowship Hall where members of my Lay Advisory Team divided them into six groups.

The questions and answers, as well as a synopsis of the sermon that preceded it are found in Chapter 8.

It is important to acknowledge the error of having the sermon and focus groups after the Advent class had concluded. The variety of opinions expressed in the focus groups may have helped to direct my overall research and the content of the classes. Also, the sermon and focus groups “felt” like a launch or a beginning instead of an ending. There was little chance for follow-up or additional learning. This was frustrating.

CHAPTER 3

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY (OR NOT!) ABOUT MARY

The first class began with a word association exercise meant to gauge people's knowledge of and comfort level with the Virgin Mary. The responses are in parenthesis.

- Mary the mother of Jesus
(Immaculate Conception, young, Joseph put her aside, pregnant)
- Blessed Virgin Mary
(Everyone, Catholic, Papist, statues, sweet, handmaiden of the Lord, Christmas pageants)
- Unwed mother
(Shame, hard, young, judgment, fear, ostracized, abort, unclean)
- Jewish mother
(Knowledgeable, good cook, protective, jokes)
- Catholics
(Male-dominated, Rome, guilt, rigid, Vatican, idolatry, spiritual, dogma, Rosary, powerful)

This was a rich and engaging experience, but not an easy one. As some anti-Catholic bias surfaced, I refrained from “correction.” This was an acute exercise in “observing and not just telling (my) story.”¹

We began with the Bible. This was a purposeful choice, meant to appeal to the Protestant principle of basing all religious beliefs on the teaching of Scripture and not on tradition. Luther's emphasis on “sola scriptura” continues to guide us.

Through a quick survey of all the Marian references in the Bible, I sought to free Mary from the manger and to present her as someone who was present and active

¹ Larry A. Golemon and editor, *Finding Our Story: Narrative Leadership and Congregational Change* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2010), 45.

throughout the life of Jesus. Mary was present at the Annunciation, the birth, the purification in the Temple, finding Jesus in the Temple at the age of twelve, following Jesus during his three year ministry, at the cross, in the company of the Beloved Disciple on the first Easter morning and in the Upper Room on Pentecost.

So what does the Bible say about these events? For the purposes of illustration, three of them are highlighted here: the Annunciation and Magnificat (Luke 1:26–55); the Wedding at Cana (John 2:1-11); and the Day of Pentecost (Acts 1:12-2:4).

The Annunciation and Magnificat – Mary Before

The richest biblical texts about Mary are found in the Gospel of Luke. It is the only place that we hear Mary speak. According to Luke, an angel of the Lord appeared to her to announce that she would give birth to the Promised One. This frightened Mary, but the angel assured her of God’s promise and presence, and then persisted in pressing the case. Mary eventually consented to the will of God with some of the most poetic words in the Gospel: “Behold, the handmaiden of the Lord” (Luke 1:38, King James Version). Mary did not understand how all of this could be and yet she said “Yes.”

With these words, Mary provides a potent example of the obedience to which all Christians are called. Like Abraham before her, she could not see the future or how the promise would be fulfilled, yet she obeyed. Humble service to God and others would one day become a hallmark of her son’s ministry. “Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant...” (Matthew 20:26). Did she plant the seed of this idea in him?

As important as Mary’s “yes” is, she is more than a pliant vessel. She is also an active participant in the story. She exercises choice. In her response to the angel “Let it

be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38), Mary chooses to believe the word of the Lord. In choosing, she quite literally becomes the very first person to believe the Good News about Jesus. From this, some have concluded that Mary was, by definition, “the first Christian” and as such she is the mother of all believers.²

After the Annunciation, Mary traveled to visit her cousin Elizabeth who was pregnant with John the Baptist. When Mary entered the house, Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and began to prophesy:

Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.
And why has this happened to me that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord. (Luke 1: 42-45)

In Elizabeth’s prophetic words, we find the source for the first part of the Hail Mary prayer. Then Mary also began to prophesy. Her words are commonly known as the Magnificat and are recited by the world’s Catholic and Orthodox Christians each time they gather for worship. For many Protestants, however, the Magnificat is unknown or heard only during the season of Advent.

But her timeless words should not be bound by the liturgical season. They are words of prophecy; a promise of liberation for the oppressed. This is a common Scriptural theme. It is also interesting to note that Mary’s words are similar to the words of Isaiah that Jesus read at his inaugural sermon. Liberation for the oppressed is a Lukan theme, spoken by both mother and son.

The Magnificat itself is a pastiche of various texts and themes from the Hebrew Scriptures. Some scholars have made strong connections between the Song of Mary and

² Jason Byassee, “What About Mary,” *The Christian Century*, December 14, 2004, 30.

the Song of Hannah³ (1 Samuel 2:1-10). From this connection they imply that there may have been a female spiritual tradition passed down between the generations, but this is unclear.

In any event, there are also strong similarities between the two women. Both Hannah and Mary became pregnant in very unlikely circumstances. Both children were preceded with the promise that they would have a powerful influence on the people of God.

The songs are also similar. Both begin with the exaltation of the Lord. Both proclaim that the weak of the earth will be lifted up and the powerful would be cast down. Both end with the promise that God never forgets God's people.

While the two proclamations are similar in many regards, a portion of Mary's proclamation is actually about herself. Mary declared that God had looked upon her with favor and that "from now on all generations will call me blessed..." (Luke 1:48) How do we Protestants join the faithful generations in blessing Mary? And if we don't, why not?

The Wedding at Cana – Mary During

Unlike the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, the Gospel of John contains no birth narrative. Mary is never mentioned by name. However, John places her at two pivotal scenes in the life and ministry of Jesus: at the wedding at Cana and at the crucifixion.

In the familiar story, Jesus and his mother attended a wedding in Cana. The hosts had run out of wine, causing a social embarrassment. Mary, presupposing that her son could remedy the situation, asked him to intervene. Jesus seemed rather annoyed at the

³ John Reumann, *Mary in the New Testament* (Richmond, VA: Paulist Press, 1978), 139.

intrusion and stated that his time had not yet come. But Mary persisted, assuming that he would listen to her request. She instructed the servants to do whatever he told them. The story culminates with Jesus turning the water into wine, the first of his miracles. John reported that the chief steward and host were delighted with the sudden appearance and quality of the wine, but perplexed about why the best wine had been saved for last.

At the very least, Mary used her power as mother to convince Jesus to do what was needful in that moment. But is that all that happened here? Is it possible that Mary might be said to have wielded a special influence on her son. This is a reasonable assumption given Jesus's own statement of protest that the time was not right. If it is true that Mary was able to influence her son's actions on earth, is it reasonable to conclude that she still wields some influence in the communion of saints? Does she, like all the saints, intercede for us? And if so, are her intercessions any more powerful than others?

The Day of Pentecost – Mary After

While the Gospel of John records that Mary stood under the cross of Jesus and witnessed his passion that is not the end of her presence in the New Testament record. Mary was also present at the birth of the church.

The writer of Acts is careful to record the names of all the Apostles who were present in the Upper Room and then adds this: "All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers." (Acts 1:14) While acknowledging the presence of other unnamed women, the writer is careful to name Mary and to designate her as the mother

of the Lord. Why was that important for Luke? Could it be that he wished to establish Mary's place in the early church?

A comparative study of all the New Testament references to Mary, including this reference in Acts, indicates that she was present at every moment in the life of her child and beyond. Mary, who had once carried the Holy One in her body, would carry him in her flesh again. Filled with the spirit of Jesus, Mary would continue to spread the Good News.

Because Mary was present before, during and after the earthly life of Jesus, she is the only person who witnessed the complete unfolding of our salvation. That seems worthy of note.

Reaction and Implications

In the give and take of discussing biblical references to Mary, several themes emerged. First, most class members were most comfortable relating to Mary as a human mother. This emphasis on motherhood was not surprising given that Protestants know of her mostly as a character in the Christmas story. But it was her familiar role as mother that also caused the most discomfort. One cannot talk about Mary the mother of Jesus without talking about the nature of her pregnancy. The virginal conception was a difficult idea for some to accept. One participant broke the ice by simply saying: "I'm not sure I believe it." Another suggested that the disconnect between our experience of pregnancy and Mary's could be solved by a less literal reading of the stories. Were these narratives simply a poetic way to convey that Jesus was no ordinary man? She noted that virginal conceptions of important people are not uncommon in ancient mythology. This

precipitated a discussion of the most accurate translation of the Hebrew word “almah,” a word that the Septuagint translated as “virgin” but which is more accurately rendered as “young woman.” Did the Gospel writers rely on this mistranslation when recording the story of Jesus? Still others seemed to have little trouble accepting Mary’s virginal status.

Second, there seemed to be general consensus that despite the controversy over the virgin birth, Mary provides a positive female role model for the Christian religion. Some commented on the fact that women are rarely named in Scripture and when they are it is not often in a positive light. Mary counters such a conception, not so much because of the nature of her pregnancy, but because of her willingness to be used by God. They also were intrigued by our rather lengthy discussion about Matthew’s genealogy and how we might connect the four women named there with Mary. Were any of these other women also models of faithfulness despite their strange circumstances?

Third, as noted before, there was also evidence of a not-so-latent anti-Catholicism. Some participants seemed ready to cede Mary to the Catholics, as if she were “theirs.” Others had a hard time imagining Mary as having any role other than that of the mother of Jesus, since her motherhood seems to be the dominant Catholic idea. The word idolatry was even mentioned. Despite this, the Hail Mary prayer so closely identified with Catholic piety received some positive feedback. One person mentioned that it was “comforting” for the people who said it. Another used the word “powerful” to describe the intercession to “pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.”

Finally, the most animated responses came at the suggestion that Mary had other roles in addition to being the mother of Jesus. Class members liked the idea of Mary as a prophet in her own right, Mary as the first Christian theologian (as someone who

pondered the truth about Christ in her heart), Mary as the mother of all Christians (since she was the first to believe the good news about Jesus), and Mary as an interpreter of the life of Jesus (since she was there before, during and after). This was more familiar territory for progressive Protestants. We had moved away from grappling with the supernatural. We had begun to develop her character as an individual; to, in the words of Clarissa Pinkola Estes, “untie the strong woman.”⁴ We were freeing Mary from the manger.

⁴ Clarissa Pinkola Estés, *Untie the Strong Woman: Blessed Mother's Immaculate Love for the Wild Soul* (Boulder, CO: Sounds True, 2011), 15.

CHAPTER 4

PRAYING WITH THE ICONS OF MARY

An Orthodox Perspective on Mary

The second class was designed as an invitation for the group to move toward having a more spiritual encounter with Mary. Since my own spiritual awakening had been inspired by the image of Nossa Senhora Aparecida, would exposing the group to other icons and the theology around them have a similar effect for anyone else?

Icons, while familiar in Roman Catholicism, are more closely associated with the Orthodox tradition. Orthodox icons of Mary express an Orthodox understanding of Mary as “Theotokos” or God-bearer or Mother of God.

The theology of Theotokos, so widely accepted today by the world’s Catholic and Orthodox Christians, was once a point of great controversy. At the root of the schism was a personal battle between two very strong characters: Nestorius and Cyril, fifth century church leaders. Nestorius was consecrated bishop of Constantinople in 428. It was a striking rise in power for someone who had been a rather lowly monk.¹ Nestorius was known for his asceticism and piety. He was also a brilliant, handsome and distinguished preacher – with a high-pitched and rather effeminate voice. Oddly enough, this only added to his popularity as a preacher.

¹ John Anthony McGuckin, *The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 237.

Nestorius was chosen to be bishop by the Emperor Theodosius II. Perhaps the Emperor thought that Nestorius, the once humble monk, would be a pliant bishop, but that was not the case. While pandering to the Emperor, he ignored and agitated the other ruling elites, including the Emperor's very devout sister Pulcheria. Pulcheria was loved by the masses and used her tremendous wealth and influence to build churches, hospitals and orphanages.

In his attempt to propagate a "pure" understanding of the faith, Nestorius sought to eradicate what he believed was an inappropriate elevation of Mary. He preached that Christ's divine and human natures were distinct from one another. Therefore Mary should be thought of as "Christotokos," that is the mother of the human Jesus and not "Theotokos," mother of the divine Christ. His brand of Marian theology made him the enemy of many powerful people. Among them was Cyril, the revered Patriarch of Alexandria. Cyril was a strong proponent of Theotokos, a word most accurately rendered as "the one who gave birth to the one who is God."²

On the surface, Nestorius's and Cyril's argument was about Mary. But underneath the surface it was really an all-too-familiar argument about Christology. How do we understand the nature of Jesus Christ? Is that nature divided? Was it possible for the human Mary to only be the mother of the human part of Jesus? If not, then what does it mean to say that a very human Mary gave birth to divinity? According to Nestorius "... Jesus had two distinct centers of operation in his life. He was human and divine. These two circles of operation, however, must not be confused; otherwise the resultant

² Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 55.

vision of Christ would be muddled and confused: someone who was neither God nor man.”³

The battle between Cyril and Nestorius, while quite heated, was rather short-lived. A mere three years after having been appointed Bishop of Constantinople, Nestorius was declared a heretic at the Council of Ephesus in 431. The doctrine of Theotokos became the official position of the church, and continued to be the official position of both the Eastern and Western churches after the Great Schism of 1054.

In Eastern Orthodox theology, because Mary is Theotokos she is more highly exalted than any other revered person. In Orthodox piety, the religious order of importance is as follows: The Theotokos, Angels, Prophets, Apostles, Fathers, Martyrs, etc. Since Mary is higher than the angels, she is often referred to in Orthodoxy as Our Lady of the Angels. Her superior place is recited at every Orthodox service of worship. She is declared to be “more honorable than the Cherubim and more glorious without compare than the Seraphim...”

Orthodox theology, like Catholic theology and Reformation theology, claims that Mary was a virgin pre-partum, in partum and post-partum. Orthodox Christians are offended by the Protestant claim that Scripture teaches that Mary had other children. Relying heavily on tradition and extra-canonical sources like the Protoevangelium of James, they claim that the “siblings” of Jesus were actually the children of Joseph from his first marriage.

Unlike some unofficial Catholic teaching that references Mary as coredemptrix (along with Jesus), Orthodox Christians view her primary role as intercessor. Mary is the

³ McGuckin, 237.

highest saint in the communion of saints. Like the other saints, she prays for us. Because she is in the position closest to God and Jesus, her intercessions are the most effective and powerful. But she is much more than just an intercessor. “The Virgin Mary is the center, invisible, but real, of the Apostolic Church.”⁴ Further,

Mary is not merely the instrument, but the direct positive condition of the Incarnation, its human aspect. Christ could not have been incarnate by some mechanical process, violating human nature. It was necessary for that nature itself to say for itself, by the mouth of the most pure human being: ‘Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it unto me according to Thy Word.’⁵

About Icons

Many Protestants are suspicious of images used for religious devotion. This is a direct and lasting result of the anti-image emphasis of some of the Protestant Reformers. There is a common misperception among Protestants that people are actually praying *to* the image. Catholic and Orthodox Christians object to this assumption. Orthodox theology teaches that one does not pray to an icon, but rather prays *with* an icon. This difference in emphasis and theology is best understood experientially.

Icons are meant to be interactive and one understands this only as one contemplates an iconographic image. In doing so, one is said to join a community already at prayer. If Mary is a vital member of the communion of saints, and if all those who gaze upon this image are also part of that communion and community, then praying with an icon might be thought of as simply “joining in.”

⁴ Sergius Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimirs Seminary Pr, 1997), 117.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 188.

Icons are complex religious and artistic expressions, sometimes referred to as “theology in line and color.”⁶ Each stroke of the paintbrush is purposeful and layered with meaning. In the practice of contemplation, one is meant to be drawn in by the icon’s sense of movement and use of color. In that interaction, one begins to understand something of the image’s message. But one is not expected to see or understand all of that meaning in a short period of time. Instead, the reward of praying with an icon is that the more one prays, the more one sees and understands.

Orthodox theology also stresses that icons cannot be properly understood outside of their original context. While one might admire the beauty of an icon in a museum, it is not possible to fully understand it outside of the church or home it previously inhabited. Icons are thought to be imbued with the spiritual energy that comes from generations of prayerful focus. Their placement in a church or home is purposeful and they are fully understood only in relation to the other objects around them. Thus, icons are “living” things.

Praying with Icons

The group spent the second part of the class engaging with three different icons from the Orthodox tradition: the Hodegetria, the Eleousa, and the Orans (see Appendices 5, 6, 7). What follows is a brief description of each along with the observations of the class members. Please note that in the class, student reactions came first. Only then did

⁶ Kallistos Ware, foreward to *Ponder These Things: Praying with Icons of the Virgin*, by Rowan Williams (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2012), x.

we move on to what the experts said. That order is reversed here for the sake of the reader.

The Hodegetria

The Hodegetria or “the one who points the way” originated in the Middle Ages and has been reproduced many times. Like with other icons, the gestures and lines of the Hodegetria are meant to draw the eye on a journey of sorts. The engagement of vision and imagination forms a kind of prayer. Theoretically, one can start anywhere and simply follow the lines.

Mary points away from herself and to the Christ child. She looks at us but with her hand, she points back to her son as if speaking to us about him. Christ, however, is looking and pointing at Mary. There is a dynamic engagement between the two, a circular action and what could be said to be an active love relationship. Rowan Williams says that this dynamic engagement between the two has its foundation in scandal. Underscoring the strange circumstances surrounding Mary’s pregnancy and Jesus’s birth, he writes: “...in the cross, Jesus demonstrates that he loves the love his mother exhibited in accepting the shame and scandal of his birth. He is not ashamed to be known as her son, and in his affirmation of her he affirms what is the nature of the faith we are all called to.”⁷

Comments, Observations and the Beginnings of Prayer

⁷ Rowan Williams, *Ponder These Things: Praying with Icons of the Virgin* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2012), 14.

Following are the comments and observations of the class members as we pondered the images together. Notice that in each case what begin as rather mundane observations about style or content becomes more contemplative as the discussion continued. With each image, we approached prayer *with* the icon.

- Mary and Jesus have what appears to be facial hair under their chins.
- Jesus's halo is divided into seven parts.
- The images look "Oriental."
- Jesus appears to be a small adult.
- Jesus is making an interesting sign with his hand.
- Both have very sad eyes.
- Mary looks slightly annoyed.
- There is an interesting geometry to Mary's veil.
- Mary looks older.
- Jesus is sitting cross-legged.
- Mary is pointing to Jesus and Jesus is pointing the way.
- Jesus is the way.
- Jesus's hand is right where Mary's heart would be.
- There is a circular energy to the painting.
- The liturgical year is circular.
- Jesus is looking at the world; Mary is looking at us.
- Mary looks at us with empathy.
- Mary sees us seeking.

- Faith is a quest and Mary bears with us in that quest.
- Mary is not looking at us. She is looking past us at some unseen place.
- She is thinking of bigger things than what is right in front of her.
- Mary is lost in thought.
- Her hand placement says “Don’t ask me, ask him.”
- The three circles on Mary’s robe might be representative of the Trinity.
- The trim on Mary’s veil travels around her face and then leads the eye back to Jesus.

The Eleousa

The Eleousa is also known as the Virgin of Loving Kindness. This is one of the best known iconographic images of Mary. It is based on the twelfth century icon “Mother of God of Vladimir,” a favorite of the late Henri Nouwen. In this image, the Christ child embraces Mary, but this is not a passive embrace. They are cheek to cheek. One of his arms encircles her neck. He seems to be trying to climb up higher, using one of his feet to push off against her body and get even closer to her face. With the other hand Christ appears to be grasping at the corner of Mary’s veil. In some later versions of this icon, the Child has one hand fondling Mary’s chin. There is an immediacy and intensity to the love expressed in this image, along with a sense that Mary seems slightly embarrassed by this boisterous child.

Comments, Observations and the Beginnings of Prayer

Following are the observations and comments of the class members.

- They are cheek to cheek.
- Mary looks very sad as if she has been crying.
- There are seven folds in Mary's veil.
- There are stars on her veil.
- They are embracing.
- Jesus looks more like a baby in this icon.
- Mary is holding Jesus in a very tender manner.
- Mary looks world-weary.
- One of Mary's eyes looks at us and the other looks beyond us.
- Mary is gazing at us more than she is looking at us.
- Mary looks like she is pondering.
- There is an expressed urgency.
- Jesus is emerging from his swaddling clothes like he is emerging from his humanity.
- There is a wonderful tenderness in this image.
- It looks like Jesus could fall if Mary is not careful.
- Icons are reflections of our own personal needs; we see what we need to see.
- Mary looks like a mother who has been up all night with her baby. God sometimes keeps us up all night.
- The three lines under Mary's eyes could represent the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The Orans

The Orans is also known as “The Virgin of the Sign.” A veiled woman is one of the most ancient symbols of Christianity. During the persecutions of Christianity’s earlier years, explicitly religious symbols were dangerous. The veiled woman was a common image in general, but had multiple meanings for the church. It may have represented Mary or may have been a symbol of the church itself - the Bride of Christ.

In the Orans, some interpret the image of Christ on Mary’s chest as a medallion. Others see that Mary is actually pregnant with Jesus. If the woman is representative of the church, then Christ is living in and through the church. If Mary is still pregnant, then Christ is incarnate as a fetus, totally dependent, hidden, helpless and invisible except through the body of the woman.

In Eastern Christian thought, the church is referred to as the divine humanity of Christ or the expression of Christ in the world. In the same way, for the nine months of her pregnancy, Mary was the divine humanity of the fetus that would be Jesus.

Another message of the Orans is that the Christ who resides in us also prays in and through us. Like a pregnant woman who is sometimes more aware of her child’s presence when it is kicking, we are sometimes more aware of the Christ who lives in us and prays through us.

Finally, Williams notes that this icon is a thought-provoking representation of intercessory prayer. With Christ fully present in her, “Mary opens her hands to God in

prayer, but her eyes are open to the world.”⁸ “Praying is not necessarily best described always as looking towards God; sometimes, and especially in intercession, it is equally a learning to look at the world as if with God’s eyes.”⁹ The Orans invites us to assume a similar posture of prayer.

Comments, Observations and the Beginnings of Prayer

Following are the observations of the class members.

- Mary and Jesus are not touching at all.
- Jesus is inside her.
- There is a flame or an angel underneath Jesus.
- It looks like an Indian painting of the goddess Shiva.
- It looks like she is coming out of the frame because her halo comes above the painted frame.
- Mary’s garment looks like the other garments in other icons.
- It is very stylized and symmetrical.
- The hands are partly hidden behind the frame.
- Mary seems to be saying “Behold.”
- Jesus is inside Mary.
- The red thing could be her uterus.
- Her hands seem to be signs of welcome.

⁸ Rowan Williams, *Ponder These Things: Praying with Icons of the Virgin* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2012), 52.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 53.

- Mary looks happy, not morose like some of the others.
- Mary is at peace with what is going on.
- This seems like the Annunciation.
- Is the sign Intercession?

The Icon of Nossa Senhora Aparecida

The class closed with a brief look at some other icons. One member brought in her own personal icons, including one made by a person interred in a World War II prisoner of war camp. The class was very moved by this. We also spent time a few minutes with my icon of Nossa Senhora Aparecida. Following are the class's observations (see Chapter 1 for a full description of the icon).

- It's too bad your one friend didn't live to see its completion.
- It's very touching.
- Thank you for bring her in. She's gorgeous.
- Is there a special place in your house for it?
- It's beautiful.
- Did you chose the subject matter or was it a surprise?
- The crown is so huge. It is heavy on Mary's head. Her responsibility is heavy.

Other Reactions and Pushback

Throughout this class, there were some negative reactions. During the discussion of the history and theology of Theotokos, some pushed back against the heavy emphasis on dogma. Since the United Church of Christ is not a creedal church, dogma is

sometimes viewed with suspicion or at least as a distraction. There was a tendency in the group to view the hard-fought theological battles as “silly.” There was also a strong reaction against the Orthodox and Catholic teaching that Mary remained ever-virgin. Scripture’s references to Mary’s other children were cited.

Some viewed the exercise of praying with icons as too literal. Someone said that we see whatever we want to see. We impose our own biases on these pieces of art. One person expressed that she never “got” praying with icons and seemed frustrated by this.

There was also a good deal of talk about feminine expressions of the divine in other religions. One class member referenced how icon placement in private homes is similar to Buddhist shrines that some people keep in their homes. Another said that one of the images reminded her of the Goddess Shiva. Still another member reminded the group that Ephesus, where the Council of Ephesus was held in 431 establishing the dogma of Theotokos, was also the home of the Greek Goddess Artemis. In this person’s opinion, a place steeped in female religious imagery would have been a natural place for the elevation of Mary.

CHAPTER 5

MARY DURING THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION

Before one can speak about Mary and Marian devotion during the Protestant Reformation, one must first understand what her place in the Christian church had been, what it had become and how that Mary became part of a much larger protest.

For the first few centuries of the Christian era, there was not a defined Marian theology, although there was a developing and consistent interest in her (i.e. the Protoevangelium of James). However, by the fifth century Marian theology and devotion had gained ascendancy. By the Middle Ages, Marian devotion had reached something of an apex. How did this happen? The answer is complex and multi-layered, but once again this attention to Mary had more to do with Christ than it did his mother.

In the theology and piety of the Middle Ages, Christ had morphed from the Good Shepherd of an earlier age to an increasingly angry and vengeful judge. Art from this period often shows a scowling or angry looking Christ. As people sought an approach to the divine, they began to look for a more pliable image. They found that image in the person of Mary. In the popular devotional theology of the time, one could ask Mary to approach her angry son and intercede with him. Mary was believed to have a special influence over Jesus. Some medieval paintings even show Christ being placated by his mother's milk, an odd image for twenty-first century people, but comforting for the faithful of that time.

Mary began to be seen as a mediator, a role that had been traditionally assigned to Jesus. Bernard of Clairvaux referred to Mary as “a mediator with the Mediator.” Christ still stood between us and the Father, but Mary stood between us and the Son. Saint Anselm said very much the same thing: “She (Mary) pleads with the Son on behalf of the sons.” By the Middle Ages, Mary’s role had become so important that some claimed it distracted from the centrality of Christ. It was against the growing tide of perceived excesses by the Roman Church that the Reformers reacted. But contrary to popular Protestant belief, the Reformers did not discard Mary. She remained a central figure in their piety and theology. But that Marian devotion did not survive the passage of time.

The influence of the Reformation is still keenly felt in the Protestant churches of the twenty-first century. The United Church of Christ can trace its theological origins back to three of the major Reformers. They, and their thoughts about Mary, are highlighted here.

Martin Luther (1483-1546)

On October 31, 1517, a German priest named Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the church door at Wittenberg. These were mostly a reaction against indulgences, a money-making mechanism that promised less time in purgatory.

Luther’s theses were not statements of anti-Catholicism. They were, instead, a call for internal reforms to purify the one church. Despite Luther’s expressed commitment to the Roman Church, his ideas were viewed as too extreme and politically dangerous. He was excommunicated in 1520. In 1521, the Holy Roman Emperor

Charles V issued the Edict of Worms, an order calling for Luther's execution by anyone who happened to see him.¹

Throughout the rest of this life, even as he moved further away from the Roman Church, Luther continued to practice Marian devotion. He strongly believed in the communion of saints – the idea that the saints in heaven pray for the saints on earth. Since Mary was a vital part of that communion, Luther taught that it was her special function to pray for the church in the world. Luther encouraged making intercessions for the church directly to Mary since she was the church's spiritual mother.

Luther also continued to pray the "Hail Mary" and encouraged the faithful to do the same. However, he advocated a different emphasis. The prayer was not to be seen as a prayer to Mary (in the same way that one prays to God) but rather it was a way to meditate on her faithfulness to the call of God.

In addition to the recitation of the Hail Mary as a spiritual practice, Luther encouraged the veneration of Mary as the mother of God and as the first disciple of Jesus. In a sermon preached on September 1, 1522 he said, "The veneration of Mary is inscribed in the very depths of the human heart."² Likewise, he never shied away from referring to Mary as the "Mother of God."

In Luther's theology, three distinct Marian emphases stand out: (1) Mary remained the person and place where God chose to enter the human story most deeply; (2) Mary was a disciple before she was ever a mother. Had she not believed, she would

¹ Jenny Schroedel and John Schroedel, *The Everything Mary Book* (Avon, MA: Adams Media, 2006), 126.

² "Martin Luther's Devotion to Mary," CatholicCulture.org, <http://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?id=788> (accessed November 14, 2013).

not have conceived; (3) and Mary was the embodiment of two of Luther's signature theological ideas: *sola gratia* (grace alone) and *sola fide* (faith alone).

Luther preached Marian sermons on all of her feast days. The Magnificat was sung daily in Luther's churches. Interestingly, those practices continued for one hundred years after his death. Images of the Virgin were retained in many Lutheran churches until the eighteenth century.

Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531)

Ulrich Zwingli was a Swiss Reformer whose connection to the present-day United Church of Christ is the most direct. Zwingli's followers became the Reformed churches of Switzerland, Germany and the Netherlands. In the eighteenth century, some of those Reformed Christians immigrated to the United States, settling in places like Pennsylvania. Eventually, they would form the Evangelical Synod of North America and the Reformed Church in the United States. These two bodies merged in 1934, creating the Evangelical and Reformed Church. In 1957, the Evangelical and Reformed Church merged with the Congregational Christian Church (also the result of a merger in 1931) to form the United Church of Christ. To this day it is not uncommon to find a congregation named Zwingli United Church of Christ in certain parts of the country.

Of all the major reformers, Zwingli was perhaps the most devoted to the Virgin Mary. This is surprising in that Zwingli was also the most reactionary against Rome. He white-washed the walls of his church in Zurich in order to cover the religious paintings. He nailed the organ shut. He removed all the statues from their niches, including images of Mary. Yet his devotion to the Virgin never waned.

Zwingli's approach to Mary was highly devotional. He too encouraged praying the Hail Mary, but taught that it was an act of praise to God, not an intercession to the Virgin. Zwingli encouraged the contemplation of Mary's heart. He believed that the inclinations of her heart were closest to God's intention for the world. He based this idea on Luke 2:19 and 51: "But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart" and "Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart."

Zwingli also preached that Mary is an example of faithfulness in times of persecution and suffering. In this way, she is a source of inspiration for those who suffer. He wrote, "Therefore may you, with your poverty and your weariness, find an example in her: this misery that is so well known to humans must be borne, since the Holy Mother of God was not sheltered from it."³

Zwingli also preached the doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary. He based this idea on Ezekiel 44:2, which reads: "The Lord said to me: This gate shall remain shut; it shall not be opened, and no one shall enter by it; for the Lord, the God of Israel, has entered by it; therefore it shall remain shut." This became known as the "Shut Gate Theory" and was used by many of the English reformers as biblical proof of Mary's perpetual virginity.

John Calvin (1509-1564)

³ Schroedel and Schroedel, 130.

John Calvin was a French lawyer and highly influential Reformed theologian. His connection to the United Church of Christ is through the Reformed theology of the Pilgrims and Puritans who would become the New England Congregationalists.

Calvin is part of the so-called second ring of Reformers, those a generation or two removed from the likes of Luther and Zwingli. With each successive generation, the reformed Christians and their leaders were decidedly less interested in Mary. Calvin is representative of that sentiment.

Calvin opposed any sort of Marian devotion. Like Zwingli, he was against images in general, including images of Mary. He also opposed the recitation of the Hail Mary, either as a prayer to Mary or as an act of praise to God. Calvin did not use the phrase “Mother of God,” not because he discounted the Christology reflected in such a saying, but because he believed that this phrase promoted superstition.

Still, Calvin still held a high view of Mary. He maintained (as did all the Reformers) that Mary was ever-virgin. To believe otherwise was to fall into the heresy of Helvidius, a fourth century Christian who argued that the Scriptural references to the siblings of Jesus were proof that Mary did not remain a virgin. Calvin also taught that Mary was an invaluable example of obedience to the will of God. He wrote: “She was a mirror of the faith that we must bring to God.”⁴ Calvin taught that all Christians should strive to be like Mary, the one who was open to receiving the word of God in her heart. He referred to her as “the treasurer of grace,” meaning that she kept faith as a deposit – the very thing we are called to do.

⁴ Schroedel and Schroedel, 132.

Comments, Observations and Pushback

Most of the class members seemed genuinely surprised by the levels of Marian devotion kept by Luther and Zwingli in particular. This was completely new information for them, as it had been for me. They seemed open to the idea of exploring Marian devotion for themselves. It seemed that knowing more about the Reformers' views on Mary gave them "permission" to experiment.

The class members seemed to be a representative sample of Protestantism in that they had no idea that some of the Reformers kept Marian devotion. This makes me wonder: how did we Protestants so completely forget what we once knew? How did we become so far removed from any Marian devotion or theology?

The strongest reactions and most animated conversation came from the discussion of bodily fluids in popular religious devotion, as well as the argument around the "Shut Gate Theory." Medieval references to an adult Jesus being placated (suckling) at his mother's breast were shocking to the group. This precipitated a much longer discussion about medieval views of biology. For example, it was commonly believed that all bodily fluids were the same, but simply repurposed for different needs. Thus mother's milk and blood were actually the same life-sustaining substance. The class was equally shocked by medieval portrayals of chalices filled by the spurting blood of a Crucified Christ. Likewise, images of Christ reaching into his open side to retrieve the host caused a negative reaction.

Another challenge for the class was the "Shut Gate Theory." That discussion elicited groans of discomfort. One person exclaimed: "No way!" while another lamented that "Zwingli really went down-hill for me." There were accusations of proof-texting and

a purposeful ignoring of biblical references to Jesus's siblings. Some thought that the "Shut Gate Theory" perpetuated a sort of "sex-phobic" theology.

This led to a much broader discussion about the place of rationalism and mystery in the practice of religion. One member expressed great discomfort with the idea that mystery was a necessary part of faith. She maintained that the insistence on mystery opened the door for abuse by those in power. In particular, she believed that the "excuse" of mystery should not be used on children.

The rest of the class members, however, seemed much more comfortable with mystery. There was a general acceptance that some things about the faith simply cannot be rationally perceived or understood. These members felt that there was no shame in answering a question of faith with "I don't know." One member argued that this is actually a very good answer for children who ask hard questions. He maintained that children embrace mystery as part of their experience of living. He expressed a desire that adults be more child-like in their religious experiences.

CHAPTER 6

MARY AMONG MODERN-DAY PROTESTANTS

The final class began with a review of the material of the previous three weeks, using a timeline of the life of Mary (see Appendix 8). In this final class I hoped to establish that Marian interest among Protestants had become more pronounced in the past few decades.

I told my story about meeting Mary at the shrine in Brazil (see Chapter 1). I emphasized that my story was offered not as dogma, but as testimony. In telling the story, I only hoped to demonstrate that I was one of a growing number of Protestants who had become interested in Mary.

Several of the class members seemed moved by hearing about my experience at Aparecida. Others were surprised that a mainline Protestant minister would have such an experience. But no one expressed any outright skepticism. I credit that, at least in part, to the nature of Congregationalism. The individual religious experience is highly valued. Judgments about the veracity of the experience are rarely made. Still, I felt some need to try to “explain” it all to them. This had to do with my own insecurity about sharing what I initially considered a private religious moment. In class I referred to it as “some kind of mystical transference of spiritual energy.” But this was a short-selling of the experience itself. Over time, Mary had become a bridge for me, connecting me to the larger body of Christ.

This ecumenical development was not unique to me. In the Second Vatican Council document “*Lumen Gentium*” or “Light of the Nations,” Mary is purposefully described in terms that Protestants might be able to accept. Drawing on Scripture, the document portrays Mary as someone on a pilgrimage of faith. It also purposefully relies heavily on the writings of the Church Fathers, since Protestants also honor their contributions. In addition, some Protestant theologians, like Beverly Roberts Gaventa and others, have encouraged a fuller engagement with Mary by appealing to other Protestant “bridges.” For example:

- (1) Information about Mary and the words of Mary are actually found in the Bible.

While the references to Mary are not plenteous, they are rich in content and implication. Also, the practice of singing the Magnificat easily connects with the Protestant practice of memorizing and singing the words of Scripture.

- (2) A renewed emphasis on Mary is actually a renewed emphasis on the importance of Christology. What we believe about Mary matters because it directly affects what we believe about Jesus. The doctrine of the Theotokos declares that Christ’s humanity and divinity are undivided. This doctrine “is a safeguard to the fleshiness of God.”¹ Attention to Mary keeps Jesus’s feet firmly planted on earth and in heaven. As Martin Luther once said, “Mary suckled God, rocked God to sleep, prepared broth and soup for God.”² To call Mary the Mother of God is, first and foremost, a declaration of what we believe about Jesus.

¹ Jayson Byassee, “What About Mary?” *The Christian Century*, (December 14, 2004), 29.

² Ibid.

- (3) Careful attention to Mary leads to a renewed emphasis on the humanity of Jesus. To consider that Jesus our Lord lived in the amniotic fluid of this woman has profound theological implications. Jesus was nourished through Mary's umbilical cord. He suckled at her breasts and ate the food her hands prepared. These simple motherly acts served to ground Jesus fully in the human experience. "That God is born in the midst of a quite average life is a claim that Mary safeguards."³
- (4) Mary was a preacher and a prophet. In the words of the Magnificat, we hear the words of the prophetic tradition of Israel. Mary proclaims the goodness of God and that God is on the side of the poor and the oppressed. In viewing one of Mary's roles as proclaimer of Good News, we re-emphasize the centrality of the proclamation of the Word of God for Protestants. Mary as prophet/preacher also gives us a very strong example of the ministry of a woman in the New Testament.
- (5) Mary is a strong feminist/womanist connection to a faith that is generally patriarchal. Mary embodied the divine without any assistance from men. As theologian Christopher Morse put it, "... at the most important event in all history the mighty male is excluded."⁴ Mary is more than simply "the handmaiden of the Lord." Mary is a woman who exercised choice. "Salvation begins with Mary's yes."⁵

Mary is also making an appearance in the United Church of Christ, a united and *uniting* church. We speak of the "hidden histories" of the UCC to refer to the continuing contributions of women, Latinos, LGBTQ persons, the Black Church, etc. One of those

³ Ibid., 29.

⁴ Ibid., 32.

⁵ Ibid., 32.

contributing streams is composed of people who at one time identified as Roman Catholic. Some of these people bring a certain sensibility about or devotion to Mary with them. How has their Christology been shaped by the emphasis on Mary as the Mother of God? How will they express these beliefs in the congregations of which they are a part?

There is a very strong emphasis on the ministry of women in the UCC. Can a renewed emphasis on the role of Mary bolster or embolden that core value? Is Mary more accessible and more powerful to us mainline Protestants by referring to her as Mother of the Church or First Believer? Does a Marian influence help to temper the solely masculine image of God to which we object?

In addition, what might a Marian sensibility imply to people so heavily reliant upon rationality and reason? How might Mary's sensuality (the use of her body in the worship and service of God) enliven our own experiences of "fleshiness" in our daily lives and corporate worship? Would a clearer understanding of her role in the communion of saints make for richer prayer lives? Might we see her as a strong, faithful woman to whom we could turn for prayerful assistance when needed?

Comments, Observations and Pushback

One of the strongest reactions came from one class member who believed that we were forcing a modern construct onto ancient people and situations. Specifically, this person objected to making strong connections between the gender constructs of the twenty-first century and the world of the Ancient Near East. She believed that some of the modern interpretations of Mary (Mary as prophet, preacher, first disciple, etc.) could be used to detract from what she saw as a beautiful model of obedience. According to

her, we were sometimes guilty of trying to put Mary in a modern box in order to make her more palatable to a modern audience. This participant saw the work of the Holy Spirit as somehow being above or beyond the strictures of gender roles. Some class members objected to her views. They seemed able to connect to these newer ideas about Mary's purpose and place in salvation history.

There were also strong reactions to the statement that that Mary was making a "comeback" among Protestants in general and the UCC in particular via former Catholics. One person pointed out that most disaffected Catholics do not suddenly become Protestant, but rather become lapsed Catholics. Still, the evidence suggests that some of these former Catholics have found a home among the Protestants. Likewise, a number of Protestants, including some conservative evangelicals have converted to Roman Catholicism. In this cross pollination, Mary is present.

CHAPTER 7

THE RESULTS OF THE “AFTER” SURVEY

Having experienced lectures and discussions on Mary in the Bible, in Eastern Orthodoxy, in the Reformation and in Modern Protestantism, had any perceptions about Mary changed? Were there any new insights into her person or role? Did any of the objections, prejudices or fears remain? Following are the results of the post-class survey.

1. How has your understanding of Mary’s role changed based on the class?

Participant A

“I have a new appreciation for all the roles Mary played in her life and all the different perceptions I have or have had about who she was. And a stronger understanding of her as a person and a subject of so much controversy.

Participant B

“I learned more about the historical figures who admired her. She remains Jesus’s mother, the faithful.”

Participant C

“I now understand that she is a rich figure and worthy of focus by Protestants. She can be seen as an early feminist with much to offer both women and men of faith. She helps to make more real the humanity of Jesus as both fully human and fully divine.”

Participant D

“Yes it has.”

Participant E

“No idea the Reformers were Mary fans or that the BVM may have been a long-lived Founding Mother of the Jesus Movement. Was reminded of how much I love Mary.”

Participant F

“Become more rooted and factual.”

Participant G

“I learned many things! I can now make the connected between Mary as “ideal mother” (through the ages) with the original context that Matthew emphasizes. I had not considered her as a theologian, prophet, or holy in her own right (as in the Protoevangelium of James). Why am I more excited by her prophetess/theologian role than her “holy” one? Still grappling with that. But I get Luti on this: “She embodies feminine characteristics of Christianity... and may have helped us to open up the talk about the Holy Spirit as feminine.” Like it!”

2. Did the biblical references to Mary that we studied together play a role in changing your perception about her person and role? If so, how?

Participant A

“Yes, they helped me to understand why it is so important to so many that she can be perceived a certain way and where those perceptions came from in their minds (Mary as comforter, mother, disciple, etc.).

Participant B

“Perhaps they sharpened the edge regarding the understanding of the birth of Jesus being always already redemption & rebirth.”

Participant C

“Yes, because it showed her playing a much more diverse and richer role than just as the mother of Jesus. She is seen as a person of unwavering support of her son and as a person of reflection and independent thought and action.”

Participant D

“Yes. I get the feeling that much of her story must have come from her.”

Participant E

“Not really.”

Participant F

“Again, made her more substantive.”

Participant G

“Yes, it was really useful to study the biblical references; I want to go back over each one and study them more. Since John is my favorite gospel, I was delighted to revisit the Wedding at Cana scene and rethink Mary's role as Jesus' "human connection." That makes sense to me, and surprisingly, I accept her more as a conduit than "holy" in and of herself. For all of my feminist leanings (which have become truly hardwired) over years of study and practice from a feminist perspective, I still struggle with Mary's "holiness". Why? Could the "hardwiring" of the Jesus-God connection be stronger, more psychically impenetrable? I really need/want to think about this (and talk with Pastor James about it) further.”

3. Was this your first experience with icons? As a result of taking the class, how would you describe your experience with icons of Mary? What feelings or emotions surfaced, if any, when you contemplated the icons?

Participant A

“No, I have had experience with icons before, but this class was interesting because it helped me to look at them a little differently in terms of all the different interpretations people had of the pictures themselves. I have always responded emotionally to icons but enjoyed the idea of praying "with" an icon instead of using it as an object of "veneration" in the past, which felt more personal and thus deeper and more emotionally-connected.”

Participant B

“No. I was raised in an Eastern Orthodox Christian family, where icons are closely connected with service, prayer, and guardians of the house. Icons make my childhood memories particularly vivid.”

Participant C

“I now view icons with new interest, as a means of bringing me into closer relationship with Jesus, especially his human dimension. I don't anticipate that I would ever veer into viewing icons as anything more than means of facilitating a closer relationship with Jesus and making more real his human dimension.”

Participant D

“No, but it was my first seeing them as prayer -- companions rather than a more passive work of art.”

Participant E

“Not first experience. Gained more respect for the use of icons. Pacific feelings surfaced; also the sense of God as my Mother.”

Participant F

“No. Would like to explore them more from an art history point of view to add to my appreciation.”

Participant G

“This was my first experience with studying icons of Mary, and I really enjoyed that. I have such a newfound respect for the image of Mary and the image of Mary & Jesus together. I love that the pictures and stained glass taught holiness, peace, prayer, and love to those who could not read words. I now get how the open, upward hands out = prayer (which we still use today in worship--very cool). I forgot to ask in class which artists (if any) portrayed Mary solo? And when, if ever, was that solo image well received?”

4. How do you understand the phrase “God-bearer” or “Mother of God” now?

Participant A

“I know that we studied this a lot in this class, but I still understand (through my ignorance or stubbornness) Mary's role as Mother of God to relate to her "specialness," the way in which she was not just a mother, and not just a "vessel" but a unique and holy person in her own right.”

Participant B

“As always, Mother, the faithful.”

Participant C

“That Mary had a profound role in bringing Jesus into the world as a fully human being because she is fully human while deeply spiritual.”

Participant D

“Not sure. But I get a feeling that there is more to the story than even that.”

Participant E

“That all of us can emulate Mary (metaphorically) in these things. All of us can birth God in our daily actions.”

Participant F

“That Mary was chosen and accepted to be the mother of Jesus, son of god.”

Participant G

I understand that this is Mary's role in Jesus's life. She was the vessel through which God brought us Jesus Christ, but she was more than just a vessel--she nurtured Christ and raised him and helped him to become the man he grew into. This is a tribute to Mary's divine nature, if it can be said that she has a divine nature (a tricky question, I know).”

5. Were you surprised to learn about the practice of Marian devotion among the Reformers? If so, why?

Participant A

“Yes! I have always believed that Mary was the sole property of Catholics in general, and that we as protestants just "borrow/ed" her occasionally when she spoke to us, or when we need a "spiritual fix!"

Participant B

It did not have a particularly dramatic effect on me. I don't know why.”

Participant C

“Yes, because I had never heard much about their attitudes toward Mary and their practices venerating her in any way.”

Participant D

“I missed that class, I think.”

Participant E

“Yes, I thought they threw Mary out with Catholicism.”

Participant F

“Yes as not aware of it prior to class.”

Participant G

“Yes, definitely--even given our supposedly progressive roots, Mary has been largely absent in my own childhood (even, for the most part,

adulthood) Christian education. I'm glad that "devotion" is at last trickling down to seminary curricula and Christian ed classes and, to some extent, worship."

6. How would you feel about hearing or saying the first part of the Hail Mary (used by some of the Reformers) in a public worship service at Broadway United Church of Christ?

Participant A

"WOULD LOVE IT!!! I have a new appreciation for its richness!"

Participant B

"I wouldn't find it shocking / controversial, although it, objectively, might be so."

Participant C

"I would enjoy seeing how you, in particular, will bring this into public service, having read your statement about your early anti-Catholic upbringing."

Participant D

"I think people would have to arrive at a deeper understanding of that and of her before we did so. I think the prejudice and not knowing are very deeply ingrained."

Participant E

"Think it might be thought provoking and, over time, a good devotional experience."

Participant F

"Fine."

Participant G

"Truth be told, I am more ambivalent about it than I was when I first took this survey. Why? It's challenging to explain quickly here, but it has to do with context. More the teacher than the theologian, I suppose, I worry about how the Hail Mary is interpreted (rather than understood). I liked the idea initially because I'd like more attention paid to Mary as a figure of faith and love--not necessarily as a holy vessel or martyr. I hope that makes some sense; I can likely better explain it in person."

7. Has this study sparked any personal interest in Mary? If so, how?

Participant A

“Yes, more than before even, and I had interest before. It is more of a spiritual interest, though, not so much historical at this point.”

Participant B

“I think I now see her more clearly as the mother of the redeemer.”

Participant C

“Absolutely because this is an aspect of Christianity that is new to me. I remember that my brother spoke once about writing a paper on the immaculate conception in a college Bible course, which surprised my mother very much, who taught Bible in the public schools and was something of a self-educated Biblical scholar.”

Participant D

“Yes. Not sure how, but I would like to read more, but more so, to meditate more "with" Mary as my guide, not just Jesus.”

Participant E

“Yes. Hadn't been aware that she may have been a stalwart follower, and even outlived JC (so to speak) in influencing the Jesus Movement.”

Participant F

“Made it more solid and reminded me that I had been neglectful.”

Participant G

“Indeed, much. To be continued...”

8. Did what you learn in the study change your experience of the season of Advent or the celebration of Christmas? If so, how?

Participant A

“Yes, as I mentioned, I went to the Cloisters last week as a way to enjoy the images of Mary and the peace and quiet that I was feeling when "pondering" her, and that was a very intense experience. I am appreciating and relating to her in a more personal way this Advent, not just as Mary-the-mother-of-the-baby-born-in-Bethlehem.”

Participant B

“Perhaps to have a stronger sense of the connection between Christmas and Easter.”

Participant C

“It made it richer and made me put Mary in a larger context than just the Christmas season. She was a vital figure in all of Jesus' life.”

Participant D

“I am thinking more and more that Mary taught Jesus what he knew -- gave him the connection to God so to speak. And he took it and ran with it. But she has been erased by the patriarchal power structure of organized Christianity as such a creative force. I for one question that force as coming directly from God. Motherhood inspires the teaching -- she got that, and she taught Jesus.”

Participant E

“Not "change", but reminded me of my awareness that the Annunciation applies to each of us--we are ALL asked to birth God to the others around us.”

Participant F

“Yes. Made it more meaningful.”

Participant G

“Um...again, tough one. I was more mindful of Mary. But I "missed" Jesus during Christmas Eve service; the extra dose of Mary was a new experience, and one that requires either more reflection or getting used to (but I prefer the former--I know, such a Protestant, huh?! :)”

9. Do you think the congregation would benefit from further study and/or sermons about Mary? If so, in what way? If not, why not?

Participant A

“Yes, maybe from some additional perspectives, historical but also spiritual and practically speaking if that makes sense - all the roles Mary played, how she speaks to us as a woman and Mother of God and intercessor (for some) etc. There is a lot here! Maybe someone like "your nun" could lead a study about the role of Mary in the Catholic Church and how that translates to our journeys today, etc.”

Participant B

“Yes. I hope they will get an insight about her perseverance.”

Participant C

“It might be fun to focus on one of the books that you introduced to us as a discussion topic for a group. The Gaventa book would probably be an obvious choice.”

Participant D

“Yes -- to deepen our understanding of Christian faith.”

Participant E

“Absolutely. Let's explore the idea of "magnifying" God and/or "birthing" God in our daily lives. Let's explore how God "mothers" us. Let's give the allegedly "feminine" functions of God equal time!?”

Participant F

“Sure. Sermons add perspective. Mary deserves a place in our worship of God.”

Participant G

“Further study and sermons about Mary? Oh, unquestionably, YES!”

10. What are your thoughts about having a public worship service at Broadway UCC that would incorporate some Marian insights? Would you be willing to participate in a writing group that would create part of the liturgy?

Participant A

“Totally for it - and yes, would love to help writing that liturgy!”

Participant B

“I would participate in the writing group.”

Participant C

“Absolutely. Many people would be interested in learning about Mary who, for whatever reason, could not attend your very interesting classes.”

Participant D

“Go for it. If time allowed, I would help out.”

Participant E

Absolutely and absolutely.

Participant F

“Great. Not sure if I could contribute but if numbers were low I would contribute. Am using an iPad for first time and don’t have the hang of capitals etc. sorry.”

Participant G

“Sure would. Thank you for the (possible) invitation. And thank you for a wonderfully organized and executed course; I’m sorry I was only able to make half of each session. Blessings!”

CHAPTER 8

SERMON AND FOCUS GROUPS

On Sunday, February 3, 2013, I preached a sermon based on my personal spiritual journey toward and with Mary. I also included some of the research I had done for the Advent 2012 class. The sermon was delivered on Candlemas, also known as the Presentation of the Child Jesus and the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary. This was a purposeful and personal choice, but not announced to the people or recognized in our denomination.

The entire liturgy, which included the Eucharist, emphasized the person and work of Mary. The congregation had been alerted in writing about what to expect, but I wanted to include everyone in attendance that day, even visitors. The focus group questions were printed in the bulletin and before the sermon began people were encouraged to make notes along the way.

To speak about Mary so personally in a Congregationalist church was a nerve-racking process. In many ways, it felt like a kind of “coming out” to reveal this part of my spiritual journey to my intelligent, rationally-oriented congregation. But this process also had its rewards.

The full text of the sermon (Appendix 2) contained many of the arguments and questions I have presented in these pages. The goal was simply to raise awareness and

general curiosity. The final two paragraphs serve as a good summary of the issues raised in the sermon. They read:

I have only barely scratched the surface. But let me end with this: perhaps what intrigues me most about Mary is something scholarship cannot prove. We can only guess and imply and wonder. And I do wonder about this: how much of what we love about Jesus, his stories and mercy and compassion, his wit and strength, are actually reflections of his mother? Just as my mother taught me about God and the world, isn't it reasonable to assume that Mary did the same? When the people of Nazareth listened to his gracious words, did any of them ever say: "The apple didn't fall very far from the tree"?

In a church in which we value the wisdom and leadership of women; as People of the Book; in a tradition that longs for stronger connections to the feminine in the Divine; is Mary a natural avenue to some of our most deeply held values? Is she an avenue by which we might come to know Jesus better? Is she worthy of our respect and curiosity and yes, maybe even a little wonder?"

Below are the responses of the six focus groups. Answers have been combined wherever there were duplications.

(1) What did you hear in the sermon today that surprised you?

- That the Reformers said the Hail Mary
- That 40% of UCCers are former Catholics
- That James has a special interest in Mary
- That the veneration of Mary is Protestant and more wide-spread than I thought
- That Mary nurtured Jesus
- Mary's humanity and the human relationship between Mary and Jesus
- That Mary could be seen as the first disciple (which changed my view of parenthood)
- That Mary was in the Upper Room
- To think about Mary being there at every stage of Jesus's life, not just the few points we hear about in the Bible
- That James had a religious experience at a Brazilian shrine
- How much Mary may have influenced Jesus
- The fact that Mary is mentioned so few times in the Bible
- That my attitude toward Mary changed during the sermon
- Not surprised by anything in the sermon

- Idea of (Mary's) amniotic water
- That we should all be mothers of God
- Hearing Mary depicted as a strong woman
- To think of Mary as the first disciple
- Surprised that the pastor, given his background/history could access the "mystery" behind the Virgin Mary
- Surprised by the obviousness of the question – why do we Protestants not acknowledge the presence of Mary and my own failure to ask the question
- Why I hadn't thought about Jesus having Marian qualities

(2) What did you hear in the sermon today that resonated with you?

- It put Jesus in a family context
- It was a good overview regarding Mary's presence in the Gospels
- The humanity of Jesus being the son of a human mother, and the impact of that on Jesus
- Contemporary scholarship includes Mary the Mother as the Eternal Mother – that the scholarship is moving away from patriarchy
- The way that Mary raised Jesus meant that he would have been influenced by his mother's love
- Jesus as a child would have learned from Mary
- Feeling "called" to learn more about Mary
- Mary was a mother from the beginning to the end just like any other mother
- How little we know about Mary's role in Jesus's life and the role of other women in the Bible
- That Mary was a theologian like anyone who "ponders"
- For the sake of diversity, I was glad to hear about a woman in a sermon
- Behind every good man there is a woman
- Jesus's ability to relate to people may have come from his mother
- Today's sermon was not all that different from James's other sermons
- I can relate to James's sense of peace after asking for help at the shrine
- Parables are teaching tools that could be effectively used by mothers to teach their children. It is possible that Jesus adopted this teaching method from his mother.
- Tina's song was very powerful.
- One person had a moment of extraordinary calm in a church in Mexico in front of an image of Mary.
- To think of Mary as the woman "who formed the Lord"
- Mary as the archetype for all of us who give birth to Christ
- The sermon made me think of my mother – honoring Mary is a way to honor my mother and everything she taught me.
- I like the idea of the Mother of God being the first disciple.

- I like the idea of a “loving watchfulness kind of discipleship” in her heart – as a mother.

(3) Was there anything that you found troubling?

- The idea of actually praying and singing to Mary, rather than honoring her contributions as we do others
- Mary as intercessor: the implication that she has special influence (and that the dead are “listening” and can act on behalf of the living)
- Mary as the Mother of God instead of as the Mother of Jesus
- Bringing the concept of the veneration of Mary into our church and not having it turn into idolatry or fetishism
- Are we worshipping Mary? I thought we only worshipped God in the form of the Trinity.
- How patriarchal the church is and how much we ignore Mary and other women in the Bible
- I don’t understand how Mary has this power over James!
- Not in the sermon, but in the service singing hymns to Mary
- “Virgin” Mary referred to by the UCC
- Praying directly to Mary – putting women on a pedestal
- Annunciation – shouldn’t someone ASK whether to make use of one’s body?!
- The Mary that we learn about from the Middle Ages is so perfect and unbelievable – so pure that she doesn’t seem human.
- That 40% of UCCers come from the Roman Catholic Church
- I was unsettled because I had to ask myself about possible anti-Catholicism/misogyny on my part.
- Where was Joseph? Inclusion?

(4) If you could ask the pastor anything about his sermon today, what would it be?

- What is the project’s goal and how is it relevant to us?
- Should churches incorporate other traditions because they’re familiar to newcomers?
- We really don’t know much about Mary as a person, so isn’t it possible that Marian devotion (as opposed to honoring) is based on projecting one’s own needs? It is so easy to confuse “what might have been” regarding Mary with fact.
- What about Joseph? He also received divine guidance, he protected Mary and Jesus and he must have influenced Jesus as well.
- If you could speak with Mary, what would you want to know or what would you ask her?
- What is Mary’s role in the future of the church?

- What kind of responses, i.e. “blowback” have you received from your advisers at school?
- Are we worshipping Mary? Should we be?
- Tell us more about the Gospel of Mary and other writings about her.
- What is the connection between God as a Mother and Mary’s role as a mother?
- Is “Mary worship” a way that Catholic women make an “end run” around Catholic Church patriarchy?
- It is troubling to hear Mary described as the Mother of God. She is the mother of Jesus.
- Can we send petitions through Mary?
- What do you mean by we should all be mothers of God?
- Where is Calvin in all of this?
- Are there more human images of Mary?
- General curiosity about using the Hail Mary as a meditation or an ecstatic experience
- How has Marian devotion personally transformed the pastor? This person was also surprised that the newsletter used the word “transubstantiation” – a very un-Protestant word.
- What were the politics of the Protestants pushing Mary out?
- What was the Protestant critique of the Roman Catholic’s use of Mary as sinless, virgin, vessel, etc.?
- What qualities of Jesus came from Mary?
- Where is this going?

(5) What is your church of religious background? (Please note that some people identified with more than one group as they describe their spiritual journey.)

- UCC (11)
- Conservative Protestant (1)
- Baptist (2)
- Episcopalian (7)
- Methodist (5)
- Presbyterian (4)
- “Christian Atheist” (1)
- Roman Catholic (3)
- Jewish/Catholic (1)
- Non-denominational (1)
- Congregational (1)
- Lutheran (1)
- Reformed Church in America (1)
- Unitarian/Universalist (2)

- Pentecostal (2)
- Protestant (1)
- Hindu (1)
- Marxist (1)
- Jewish (1)

CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PRACTICE OF MINISTRY

During the project, I flippantly referred to Mary as the “road kill of the Reformation.” I used such shocking language to make what I think is a profound point. We have excised one of the most powerful female voices of the faith. With each succeeding generation after the Reformation, Protestants came to associate Marian devotion with the other perceived excesses of the Roman Catholic Church. The mother of our Lord was tossed out, along with statues, indulgences and relics. Over time, we have come to totally ignore her or worse. We hurl her name as an insult against other Christians who are assumed to worship her in error. As children of the Reformation, Mary makes an appearance in most of our churches about once a year, but she does so as a womb without a personality, devoid of any purpose other than to give birth to the Messiah. Mary has no voice.

But does it have to be this way? What I discovered in the course of my project is that once people could identify the existence of their anti-Catholicism, there was substantial interest in knowing this woman better and, by extension, knowing their Catholic sisters and brothers better.

Additionally, once the class members were given the appropriate tools, they were no longer content to think of her as many Protestants do: rather one dimensionally as the mother of Jesus. Exposing prejudice and giving people

options seemed to open the door of discovery and adventure. They *wanted* to know more about Mary.

During the course of the project, three strong themes emerged. These may have applications in ministry contexts other than my own, but it would take a similar process to unearth any potential interest. The themes are: 1) the reverberations of the 500 year old Reformation are still strongly felt, even in liberal or progressive churches; 2) the debate about Theotokos versus Christotokos continues and continues to matter; and 3) despite the obstacles, Protestant interest in Mary is gaining momentum and provides a natural avenue for further ecumenical and theological exploration.

As cited throughout this paper, from the very beginning of this project, a sometimes unconscious and sometimes quite open anti-Catholicism was apparent. It was often disguised as fidelity to Reformation principles.

That the Reformation was still such a powerful influence on my progressive congregation was a significant surprise to me. Many people take their Protestant identity very seriously. This is noteworthy in our time, especially when church experts claim that people are less inclined to identify with one expression of the church over another. Additionally, liberals sometimes think of themselves as not being very connected to or bound by the past. This is sometimes the expression of another kind of bias (that we understand more than our forebears). Further, tolerance is a guiding principle of liberal Protestant Christianity. Yet that tolerance seemed strangely absent from some views of the Catholic Church. Despite the progress made in recent decades, many people still imagine us to be “separated

brethren.” While we regularly express concern for interfaith dialogue, we rather easily dismiss our Catholic kin with a few words and some very old (and often inaccurate) portrayals. The work of ecumenism is far from over.

What we think we know about the Reformation is mostly expressed as an anti-Catholic impulse. Exposing people to more of the facts was eye-opening to many. In particular, learning about Luther’s and Zwingli’s Marian devotion seemed to bridge some sort of gap. In learning that the likes of Luther, Zwingli and Wesley continued to say the “Hail, Mary” gave legitimacy to approaching her from a more contemplative place. Some of the members began to appreciate the prayer from a “Protestant” point of view: as a meditation or an act of praise to God.

In addition to the Marian devotional practices of the Reformers, Luther’s emphasis on “sola scriptura” played a significant role in opening the door further for Mary. Discovering what the Bible actually said about Mary was an eye-opener for many. People seemed especially impressed to learn that Mary was in the Upper Room on the Day of Pentecost; that Mary was an active part of the early church. Moreover, “doing theology” with those passages provoked an even stronger reaction. We “unearthed” Mary in the same way that we might unearth Jesus or Paul or Peter. We did theology in the margins and between the lines. We actively imagined what might have been, what was not said, and what might be reasonably implied from the passages. For example, the class concluded that Mary might be thought of as a theologian in the broadest sense of that word since she pondered the things of God. Casting Mary in this light removed her from the debates about the Virgin Birth and made her more accessible as a person.

Second, the study of Mary opens a door to more authentic and honest conversations about Jesus. The detailed discussion about Mary as Theotokos revealed a variety of opinions among the class members about the nature of Christ. The same arguments that surfaced so dramatically in Ephesus in the fifth century are still alive and well. How Jesus is both human and divine remains enigmatic for many.

Even after the discussion, many of the participants continue to understand Jesus as being somehow compartmentalized. Some referred to Mary as mother of the human Jesus, but had a much harder time imagining her giving birth to his divine nature as well. A discussion of Adoptionism, the idea that God adopted Jesus as the divine Son when he was baptized, followed and was seen as a possible answer to this dilemma. Because of this tendency to compartmentalize, the phrase “Mother of God” never seemed to make much sense to most despite the amount of time we spent discussing it.

Discussion of the Theotokos also revealed a rather undeveloped Christology on the part of many people. This is hardly surprising. Experts have been bemoaning our lack of serious theological reflection in the mainline churches for some time now. Many clergy are remiss in teaching the finer points of theology for fear of dividing or confusing the people. We are sometimes guilty of infantilizing our congregations or of just being lazy. This is a point for self-reflection as well. I wonder how often or how honestly I talk about my own rather high Christology.

A dedicated study of Mary naturally opens the door for a more robust discussion of Christology. It has been pointed out that, generally speaking, the

more emphasis a church puts on Mary and her role of Theotokos, the higher the Christology, and vice-versa. In other words, we may start with discussing Mary but we end up with a deeper conversation about Jesus.

While the class members struggled with Theotokos, they connected very easily to the idea of an Incarnational faith. By her example, Mary invites us to also give birth to God into the world. Some were more literal about that than others. Some expressed discomfort with Bernard of Clairvaux's axiom that we are all meant to be mothers of God. Many others were intrigued by the idea and willing to engage it more deeply. In the end, it was mostly a problem of language – of what we mean when we say “mother of God” – but not of function – what it means to be a mother of God.

Third, for some the study of Mary opened a desperately needed door for possible connection to the feminine aspect of the divine. This primal human need was the impetus behind Carl Jung's shocking statement that “the Assumption (of Mary) is the most important religious event since the Reformation.”¹ Jung was not defending religious dogma but rather the psychological need for connection to a feminine divine aspect. Jung, the son of a Swiss Reformed minister, was a harsh critic of Protestantism's complete lack of female presence. He predicted that this lack would one day cause the demise of the Protestant movement. As one class member observed, Protestant Christianity, even in a progressive context, is largely patriarchal and dominated by male images.

¹ Carl Jung, selected and introduced by Anthony Storr, *The Essential Jung* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 324.

Mary can mitigate that. While not divine herself, her role in the communion of saints is especially poignant. Orthodox theology ranks her as “more honorable than the Cherubim and more glorious without compare than the Seraphim...” Class members seemed especially wary of any impending “Mary worship.” But does that caution restrict us from imagining that she is closer to the divine than other created beings?

For some, this idea of Mary was problematic. From a feminist point of view, it separates her from the rest of womankind (since she is unlike any other woman). But others seemed intrigued by the possibility that Mary bridges a certain divine gender gap.

All of those surveyed expressed a keen interest in learning more about Mary. They also reported that their interest in her as a person, and not always related to being the mother of Jesus, had increased significantly during the course. Most liked the idea of more classes about Mary and sermons and liturgy that incorporated Marian aspects. A majority even stated that with enough preparation, the congregation might be persuaded to recite the first part of the Hail, Mary (as found in the Gospel of Luke) in a public worship service.

My congregation is not unique in mainline Protestantism. I am not unique among mainline Protestant ministers. Yet, I have been drawn to Mary and so have some of those who participated in this project.

Some might wonder if I have simply projected my own needs and interests into the practice of my spiritual life and the life of my congregation. I might be more inclined to think so if mine were a solitary experience. But my studies have

proven otherwise. Many others are traveling a similar path. This path is not for everyone, but it can be instructive for many.

The study of and devotion to Mary need not obscure Jesus, as some Protestants fear. Mary can serve as a road to understanding Jesus better. Mary can be a bridge to our own longing for ecumenical connections and a strong female presence in the practice of our faith. Mary can be a beacon; illuminating those parts of Jesus we have a hard time understanding. And finally, Mary can show us how to be better disciples of Jesus. Of all of Mary's many roles, perhaps her most important is to do the very thing we have all been called to do: point people to the Savior.

In a Roman Catholic Church in Guernavaca, Mexico, renovated after Vatican II, a large crucifix hangs over the main altar. On the left wall-toward the front, yet still clearly in the nave-there is a simple, modest, unadorned figure of Mary. She does not draw special attention to herself. She stands among the people of God, and her eyes are turned to the cross. That is, I would venture to hope, a picture of Mary that Christians of the Reformation heritage, in solidarity with their Roman Catholic sisters and brothers, might happily make their own.²

And that is the picture that this Reformed Christian has made his own. Mary is a door for me, a threshold and a signpost. She invites me to journey with her into a deeper engagement with her son; to marvel at the Incarnation and to participate more fully in its wonders.

² Daniel Migliore, "Woman of Faith," in *Blessed One: Protestant Perspectives On Mary*, ed. Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Cynthia L. Rigby (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 129.

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Appendix 1

NOSSA SENHORA APARECIDA



Appendix 2

Sermon

THE APPLE DIDN'T FALL FAR FROM THE TREE

A Sermon to Introduce my Doctoral Thesis to Broadway UCC

Sunday, February 3, 2013

Rev. James Campbell

Before I begin, a few words of explanation: this will not be a regular sermon. Instead, I want to briefly introduce my developing doctoral thesis regarding Marian devotion in a liberal Protestant context. If you're visiting today, I apologize and hope you'll come back to see what a Broadway sermon is usually like. And if you're one of our regulars, I hope you'll have 20-30 minutes after service to be part of a focus group to discuss over dinner what you heard. You'll find the questions on the last page of your bulletin if you want to make any notes. Finally, I am keenly aware that I can only barely scratch the surface of some of what I have learned in the next 15 minutes or so. If you'd like to know more, you'll have to wait for the book.

I should never have been drawn to Marian devotion. It's counter-intuitive to my childhood in fundamentalism and to my ordination in the United Church of Christ, but here I am. My interest in Mary has taken an academic turn, but it did not start that way. It started as an epiphany.

In 2000, I made my first trip to Brazil with Marcos. On our way from Sao Paulo to Rio, we stopped at Aparecida, where the largest Marian shrine in the world has been under construction for more than five decades. The basilica is devoted to the patron saint of

Brazil, Nossa Senhora Aparecida (Our Lady “Who Appeared”) and houses the statue that tradition says was discovered in the nets of some fisherman in October 1717. I was greatly interested in visiting such a place not because of devotion but because I am a keen observer of religious experience.

The statue itself is rather unimpressive. It is quite small, made of dark wood with features that are barely distinguishable, and is out-of-reach behind some protective glass. This Protestant skeptic was rather underwhelmed. Others were not. The statue evoked multiple displays of devotion from many of the pilgrims, including Marcos, whose mother had been recently diagnosed with stage four cancer. I could hear him praying behind me. And so, in front of this image of the Virgin Mary, I joined him in his prayer for his mother’s well-being. Suddenly, I was overcome with emotion. I felt an intense connection to the mother of the Lord; a sense that she could offer assistance to us somehow; and a deep sense of peace. I have returned to Aparecida four times since then, and each time I have understood myself to be in the presence of mystery.

And so my journey began. I soon realized, however, that as a Protestant I knew almost nothing about Mary. That struck me then and strikes me now as odd. How much more do you know about someone by meeting her or his family? And so I began to read and study and soon discovered that there were others like me – Protestants of all stripes interested in this strong woman who, at least in part, formed the Lord.

It is not my intention today to convince you of anything – after all spiritual experience is very personal. But it is my intention to ask you, as mainline Protestants, to consider some things about Mary that may have never heard before. By necessity, I limit my brief remarks to three areas: Mary in the Bible; Mary and the Protestant Reformation; and Mary in the United Church of Christ.

For Protestants, sometimes called “People of the Book,” the Bible is a good place for us to start any inquiry into our faith. And here are some things we can derive about Mary from Scripture. Some say that Mary was the first disciple. They base this on the Gospel of Luke. According to Luke, she was the first to believe the good news of Jesus as announced by the angel Gabriel. Before Jesus was ever born, Mary already believed that God was doing a work in her son that would change the world. And being the first disciple and mother of our Lord, she is also sometimes referred to as the Mother of all Christians – and thus our mother.

Mary is also a poignant example of Incarnational theology. If on any level you believe that Jesus was divine, then Mary literally carried that divinity in her body and birthed that divinity into the world. By that act, Mary demonstrated what all Christians are called to do: to give birth to the Christ through our own flesh and blood. As the 14th century German mystic Meister Eckhart put it: “We are all meant to be mothers of God.”

Some people think of Mary as the first Christian theologian. Twice in the Gospel of Luke we read that Mary pondered all these mysterious things about her son in her heart.

One who ponders or considers or thinks about the things of God is engaging in the practice of theology. Mary did that often enough that Luke saw fit to mention it twice.

Mary was present at every pivotal moment in the life of our Lord. It is not unreasonable, therefore, to assume that she knew him better than anyone. She was present at the annunciation, during gestation and childbirth. She nursed him and raised him and taught him. She was there in the beginning of his ministry. She was there in the middle of it. And she was there at the end of it, under the cross. And here is something I had never considered before: according to the book of Acts, Mary is the only named woman who was present in the Upper Room when the spirit of her son gave birth to the church on Pentecost.

Second, Marian devotion was alive and well during the Protestant Reformation. I was rather shocked to learn that Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli and John Wesley all prayed the Hail Mary as a daily devotional practice. Being “People of the Book” it’s interesting to note that the words of the first part of this prayer are taken directly from the Gospel of Luke: “Hail Mary, full of grace the Lord is with thee” the angel Gabriel said to her at the annunciation. “Blessed art thou amongst women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb” her cousin Elizabeth exclaimed when a pregnant Mary came to visit. Additionally, Zwingli, who is a direct forbear of the United Church of Christ, encouraged his people to contemplate Mary’s heart as an act of Christian devotion based on his reading of Luke 2:51: “... his mother treasured all these things in her heart.” For these Reformers and

those who followed them, Mary wasn't a distraction from Jesus. She was a natural connection to Jesus.

Third, Mary has made an appearance in the United Church of Christ. A few years ago the denomination published a booklet entitled "Catholics in the UCC," claiming that anecdotal evidence suggests that as many as 40% of newcomers to the UCC are former Catholics. Likewise, significant numbers of our seminarians are also formerly Catholic. Perhaps they bring Mary with them. More broadly, there is a developing interest in the UCC in Mary as an important connection between the earliest Christian community and our core values of the ministry and leadership of women. Mary is a strong female presence in the earliest church.

This UCC interest in Mary finds expression in official liturgy and hymnody. To close this service we will sing a hymn "Mary, Woman of the Promise." And you will see that it is not only a hymn about Mary, but it is a hymn to Mary. Consider these words: "*Mary, song of holy wisdom, sung before the world began: faithful to the Word within you, as you bore God's wondrous plan. Mary, morning star of justice; mirror of the Radiant Light: in the shadows of life's journey, be a beacon for our sight.*" What does it mean for the children of the Puritans to sing to Mary?

The baptismal liturgy of the UCC also elevates the significance of Mary's role in the salvation of the world. In the litany for the blessing of the baptismal waters, God's mighty acts in creation are proclaimed: God's Spirit brooding over the waters at creation;

the waters of the flood washing the earth during the time of Noah; Moses leading the Hebrew people through the waters of the Red Sea. But then the liturgy makes a surprising turn toward amniotic water and proclaims: “In the fullness of time, you sent Jesus Christ, who was nurtured in the water of Mary’s womb.” Mary’s body, therefore, was a location for the “mighty acts of God.”

I have only barely scratched the surface. But let me end with this: perhaps what intrigues me most about Mary is something scholarship cannot prove. We can only guess and imply and wonder. And I do wonder about this: how much of what we love about Jesus, his stories and mercy and compassion, his wit and strength, are actually reflections of his mother? Just as my mother taught me about God and the world, isn’t it reasonable to assume that Mary did the same? When the people of Nazareth listened to his gracious words, did any of them ever say: “The apple didn’t fall very far from the tree”?

In a church in which we value the wisdom and leadership of women; as People of the Book; in a tradition that longs for stronger connections to the feminine in the Divine; is Mary a natural avenue to some of our most deeply held values? Is she an avenue by which we might come to know Jesus better? Is she worthy of our respect and curiosity and yes, maybe even a little wonder.

Appendix 3

The Order of Worship

THE ORDER OF WORSHIP FOR 2/3/13
The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

WE GATHER IN JOYFUL ANTICIPATION

Prelude: “Ave, Maria”

Franz Liszt

*The Greeting

*The Hymn of Praise: “My Heart Sings Out with Joyful Praise”

NCH #106

*A Litany Based on Mary’s Song

One: O God, whose word is fruitless when the mighty are not put down,
 the humble remain humiliated, the hungry are not filled, and the
 rich are.

All: Make good your word, and begin with us.

One: Open our hearts and unblock our ears

All: to hear the voices of the poor

One: and share their struggle;

**All: and send us away empty with longing for your promise to come
 true in Jesus Christ, until that day we join with Mary and all the
 saints in the eternal song...**

*The Gloria

WE LISTEN FOR OUR STILL-SPEAKING GOD

The Children’s Message

A Lesson from the Hebrew Scriptures: I Samuel 2:1-10

A Lesson from the Proverbs: Proverbs 9:1-6

*A Lesson from the Gospels: Luke 2:22-40

*Sung Response: "Lord, Jesus Christ"

The Message: "The Apple Didn't Fall Far from the Tree"

Pastor Campbell

WE RESPOND TO OUR STILL-SPEAKING GOD

Musical Reflection "Word Like This"

Tina deVaron

The News of our Life and Ministry

*The Passing of the Peace and Collection of Prayers of Concern and Thanksgiving

The Offering of Ourselves and Our Gifts

Offertory: "Ecce Prandium"

Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck

*The Doxology

WE COME TO THE LORD'S TABLE

The Invitation

One: The first time Jesus sat down to this meal, among those gathered there were one who would doubt him, one who would deny him, one who would betray him, and they would all leave him alone before that night was over—and he knew it. Still he sat down and ate with them. If he ate with them, surely he's ready to eat with us—baptized or not, confessed or not, Christian or not, sure or not, believer or not, saint or sinner or a little of both. All you have to be to eat at this table is hungry.

All: God will do the rest!

The Communion Prayer, Remembrance and Consecration (*responsively*)

One: The God of Jesus and Mary be with you.

All: And also with you.

One: Lift up your hearts.

All: We lift them to God.

One: Let us give thanks to God Most High.

All: It is right to give God thanks and praise.

One: Holy God, our loving Creator, in the fullness of time you sent us Jesus, nurtured in the water of Mary's womb, fed by Mary's breast, and taught on Mary's knee. In his gracious words, we hear something of his mother's wisdom. We remember her faithful discipleship throughout her life and praise you for such a witness.

Lord Jesus Christ, as you knew your mother's love at her table, so may we know something of your love at this table. Be known to us in the breaking of this common bread; in the sharing of this common cup; in the faces of our neighbors; and in each small act of grace and kindness. And whenever and wherever and however we see or hear you, may we lift our voices in praise:

Holy, Holy, Holy (sung by the people)

One: Sisters and brothers in faith, we recall anew these words and acts of Jesus Christ. Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said: "Take, eat: This is my body, given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way Jesus took a cup, and after giving thanks, gave it to the disciples and said: "Drink of it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." We remember Christ's promise not to drink of the fruit of the vine again until the heavenly banquet at the close of history and we say boldly what we believe:

All: Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

One: Holy One, pour out your Spirit on us gathered here, and on these simple gifts of bread and cup. Make them be for us the body and blood of Christ, that we may be for the world the body of Christ, infused with his very life. By your Spirit make us one with Christ, one with one another, and one in ministry and service to all the world.

All: Amen.

The Pastoral Prayer and Prayers of the People

*When the pastor says, "O God of Love and Mercy," let us reply, "**Hear our prayer.**"*

The Prayer of Our Savior (*in unison, "sins"*)

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins,

as we forgive those who sin against us.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

Breaking the Bread and Pouring the Cup

One: Blessed are you, O Lord our God, Ruler of the Universe, you bring forth grain from the earth.

Blessed are you, O Lord our God, Ruler of the Universe, you bring forth fruit from the vine.

Resurrection Acclamation

One: Alleluia! Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one.

All: I died, and behold I am alive for evermore. Alleluia!

Jesus, Lamb of God (sung by the people)

The Communion

One: These are the gifts of God for all of us, the people of God. This is the table of Jesus and because it is, there is no one in this room or in this world who is not welcome here. We receive by intinction, dipping the bread in the cup and serve grape juice instead of wine so that all may participate. Come, as the Spirit leads you. Come, let us celebrate the light and life of Jesus Christ.

Sharing the Bread and Cup

(Choir sings Edward Elgar's "Ave, Maria")

Prayer of Thanksgiving (*in unison*)

Eternal God, we have recalled the great story of our salvation. We have gathered as one family around a common table. We have been nourished by the Bread of Heaven and the Cup of Salvation. Now send us out, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to be bread for the hungry and cup for the thirsty. This we ask in the name of Christ, who leads us on. Amen.

WE DEPART TO LOVE AND SERVE

*The Hymn of Parting: "Mary, Woman of the Promise"

NCH #123

The Charge and Benediction

The worship has ended. Now let our service begin.

The Postlude "Gentle Mary"

Arnolt

Schlink

Appendix 4

“Words Like This”

© Tina deVaron and James Campbell, January 29, 2013

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XVUYWmIsTg4>

How did he get so wise?
Was it all from the mouth of the Lord?
Or was there someone close to him
Who translated the divine?

What lessons did she teach
When he was three or four?
When he was frightened in the night
Or wondering why the world could be so unfair?

“Bring sight to the blind, bring justice to the poor”
Did she sing him to sleep with words like this
Words like this, words like this?
“Heal the broken hearts, open every prison door”
Did she sing him to sleep with words, with words like this?

On my darkest days
When I’ve lost my own way
And I forget what my purpose is
What would I hear if I could pray?
Coming down to us from God
In a great and righteous chain
Isaiah to Mary to Christ our Lord
If you listen you’ll hear them say

“Bring sight to the blind, bring justice to the poor”
Yes she sang him to sleep with words like this
Words like this, words like this.
Heal the broken hearts; open every hidden door, yes
She sang him to sleep with words, with words like this.

And if the sleepy little boy said, “How do I do this, mama?”
She answered him with one word: “Love, love, love, love, love, love, love.

Bring sight to the blind, justice to the poor
Mary, sing me to sleep with love like this, love like this, love like this
Heal the broken hearts, open every hidden door, Mary

Sing me to sleep with love, with love like this.

Jesus, sing me awake with love like this, love like this, love like this

Heal my broken heart; open every hidden door, Jesus

Sing me awake with love, with love like this

Jesus, sing me awake with love, with love like this.

Appendix 5

THE HODEGETRIA



Appendix 6

THE ELEOUSA



Appendix 7

THE ORANS



Appendix 8

MARY TIMELINE

By J. Bennett Guess

Timeline: Mary

25-20 BCE

Mary, the eventual mother of Jesus, was most likely born in Nazareth and the year is speculative. The name "Mary" was a common form of "Miriam," the sister of Moses, and was a popular name among Jewish women.

7-4 BCE

Mary gives birth to Jesus. Mary also had other children, since the gospel of Matthew mentions four brothers - James, Joseph, Simon and Judas. Mary also had daughters, but Jesus' sisters are not named nor numbered. Disputes have arisen in church history about Mary's ever-virgin status. Roman Catholic tradition maintains that not only was Mary a virgin when she gave birth to Jesus, but she remained a virgin forever.

26-29

Mary is one of the women present at Jesus' crucifixion. Little is known about Mary's own death. Some believe she never experienced an earthly death.

40

Stories of Marian apparitions date back to the earliest days of Christianity.

270

St. Gregory Thaumaturgus refers to Mary as the "vessel and tabernacle containing all mysteries," who knew "what the patriarchs never knew;" who "experienced what was never revealed to the angels," who "heard what the prophets never heard."

300

By the fourth century, liturgical texts and prayers reverencing Mary and other saints were well-established. Early versions of the "Hail Mary" prayer, based on Luke's account of the Angel Gabriel's annunciation to Mary, were common.

431

The Council of Ephesus officially declares Mary to be the "mother of God."

1054

The "Great Schism" between the Eastern Orthodox Church and Roman Catholic Church, resulting from disagreements over papal authority, led to different doctrinal traditions surrounding Mary. Among Orthodox Christians, Mary became known as the "Theotokos," an affirmation of the divinity of the one to whom Mary gave birth. According to Orthodox belief, Mary was chosen by God and freely cooperated in that choice. Mary, however, did not give birth to Jesus' divinity, but his two natures were united at his miraculous virgin conception. Because of Mary's unique place in salvation history, she is honored by the Orthodox above all other saints.

1521

Protestant Reformer Martin Luther, sequestered in Wartburg, prepared his to-be-published commentary on the Magnificat. Mary, he wrote, is the embodiment of God's unmerited grace.

1540s

Marian devotion lost favor among many Protestants during the 16th-century Reformation, despite the fact that many of the major reformers held Mary in high devotion.

1563

The Heidelberg Catechism is published, referring to the Virgin Mary as "a truly human nature."

1854

The Roman Catholic Church promulgates the doctrine of the "Immaculate Conception of Mary," the concept that Mary was born without original sin. Unique to Catholicism, the doctrine holds that Mary was conceived free from the inherited guilt of the first sin committed by Adam and Eve. Among many Protestants, the Pope's infallible declaration drew a strong reaction against Marian piety and devotion, leading many theologians ?both Catholic and Protestant - to dub the doctrine "the church's most misunderstood article of faith."

1917

The apparition of Mary at Fatima includes a strong anti-communist message. "If you really knew your stuff, you could probably trace it throughout history, that people were using the apparitions to make political points as well as moral ones," says Michael S. Durham, author of "Miracles of Mary: Apparitions, Legends and Miraculous Works of the Blessed Virgin Mary."

1950

The Roman Catholic doctrine of the "Assumption of Mary" was promulgated by Pope Pius XII.

The formal dogma stated that "after the completion of her earthly life," Mary "was assumed body and soul in the glory of heaven," just as Enoch and Elijah. The church never formally declared whether or not Mary actually died, leaving that question unanswered.

1957

Even as the newly created UCC affirms the tenets of the historic creeds, it adopts a statement of faith in 1959 that does not mention Mary.

1960s

The Roman Catholic Church's Second Vatican Council attempts to temper Marian devotion by portraying Mary not as an independent force but as a way of leading people to Christ. Rather than portraying Mary as all that stands between sinful humankind and a wrathful God, the Vatican teaches that Mary derives her compassion from Jesus. "First among the disciples" becomes her more-modern identity.

1970s

Among many feminist theologians, Mary is being reclaimed as strong and assertive, rather than only regarded as God's submissive handmaiden. "The image of Mary that most of us have been given has been shaped to men's specifications to convince us that we are incapable of independent thought and action," says Patricia Lynn Reilly, author of "A God Who Looks Like Me: Discovering a Woman-Affirming Spirituality."

1981

"Mary of Medjugorje," whose apparitions are proclaimed in war-torn Bosnia-Herzegovina, is interpreted by many faithful as a force for reconciliation and peace.

2005

The worldwide Anglican (Episcopal) communion begins its first international bilateral dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church about the role of Mary in the church. While Mary has held an important place in the life and liturgy of Anglicans, Marian dogmas and Marian devotion within the Catholic Church have been seen as points which have separated Anglican and Catholic Churches.