

# Restraining Pearls

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## *A Sermon on Luke 1:46-55*

*Glenview Community Church  
(United Church of Christ)  
Glenview, Illinois*

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As a rule, especially this time of year, I avoid jewelry stores. It is not that I have anything against jewelry. Quite the opposite. I find jewelry too appealing. I do not want to give in to temptation. Entering a jewelry store can prove awfully expensive. “Every kiss may begin with K,” but my spouse, Meg, has never been heard to whisper: “He bought it at Jared’s.”

On those rare occasions when I do wander through a jewelry store’s doors, it is not the sparkling diamonds, blood-red rubies, or blue star sapphires that draw my attention. Rather, it is the iridescent pearls. There is something about a classic single strand. So simple. So elegant. How can anything so beautiful develop from an irritant in an ugly oyster?

The various world religions long have recognized the intrinsic value of pearls.

- The late 13<sup>th</sup> and early 14<sup>th</sup> century explorer Marco Polo reported that passed down through the kings of Malabar was a necklace of 104 rubies and pearls, to remind them of the 104 prayers they were to offer each morning and evening to the Hindu gods.
- In his expansive commentary on the Talmud, Rabbi Bahya ben Asher, the Spanish scholar, a contemporary of Marco Polo, taught that a pearl represented the tribe of Zebulun on the breast plate of the High Priest in the Temple.
- The Qur’an of Islam states that those who believe, do righteous deeds, and enter the garden of paradise will wear garments of silk and bracelets of gold and pearl.
- And in Christianity, well, haven’t we all heard of “the pearly gates” – in Revelation, the twelve gates of the New Jerusalem, each made from a single pearl? Jesus himself compared God’s realm to “a pearl of great price.”

Jewelers string pearl necklaces with silk thread and tie a knot between each pearl. If worn frequently, they need to be restrung annually, lest moisture, oil, and dirt weaken the fiber and lead to breakage. I learned that from Casey Baggott (the retired Executive Minister of our

church in Vera Beach, Florida), who believes the practice of restringing pearls should extend to our theological understandings as well. In one of her sermons, she noted: “It's true, isn't it, that our hard-won pearls of wisdom, our beliefs, and our experiences, need some periodic reconsideration or restringing? Notions that seemed at some earlier point to be eternal truths, give way to new thoughts and ideas.”<sup>i</sup>

Hmm. Reading that, I began wondering if my own set of collected pearls of wisdom about Mary did not need restringing. I had not reflected on her part in the Christmas narrative in a long time. Honestly, my theological understandings of Mary were more like a single pearl or two, nothing close to a neckless. They did not begin to reach to the level of insight found in a poem I discovered this past Tuesday by a contemporary American poet of Russian, Celtic, and Osage Nation descent, named Alla Bozarth. Bozarth is one of the Philadelphia Eleven – the first eleven female Episcopal priests, ordained in 1974 by three very brave bishops, in a highly secured worship service, protective shelter provided by the inner-city mostly-Black Church of the Advocate, under threats of violence, bombing, and death. She entitles her poem “Before Jesus.”

Before Jesus was his mother.  
Before supper in the upper room, breakfast in the barn.  
Before the Passover Feast, a feeding trough.  
    And here, the altar of Earth, fair linens of hay and seed.

Before his cry, her cry.  
Before his sweat of blood, her bleeding and tears.  
Before his offering, hers.

Before the breaking of bread and death, the breaking of her body in birth.  
Before the offering of the cup, the offering of her breast.  
Before his blood, her blood.  
    And by her body and blood alone, his body and blood and whole human being.

The wise ones knelt to hear the woman's word in wonder.  
Holding up her sacred child, her spark of God in the form of a babe,  
she said: “Receive and let your hearts be healed and your lives be filled with love, for  
    This is my body, This is my blood.”<sup>ii</sup>

The feminist poet's reflection on Mary bearing Jesus is far more profound than the patriarchal silence of three of the four gospel writers. Today we would not dream of leaving Mary out of the Christmas story. She is in every nativity scene, seated in the stable, gazing lovingly at her newborn child. But, in the first century, mostly she was ignored.

Mark leaves everything that happened in Bethlehem out of his account, as if Mary giving birth to Jesus was a detail not worthy of even a footnote. In John's poetic telling of the Christmas story, he does not mention Mary. Matthew, at least, tells us her name. But Matthew is far more concerned with Joseph and what he is going to do with Mary being pregnant and he not the

father. In Matthew's telling of the Christmas story, Mary never utters a single word. In fact, she does not even appear, except in a single verse, when the magi finally arrive, where Matthew writes: "going into the house they saw the child, [parenthetically] with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshipped him." That is it. Three gospel writers. No Mary.

Luke is the outlier. Only Luke has the angel Gabriel appearing to Mary with a message from God. Only Luke has Mary deciding to answer God's call to bear the child. Only Luke tells of Mary's extended conversation with Elizabeth about their babies. Only Luke shares Mary's song about the purpose of her child's life. Only Luke lets us know that upon presentation at the Temple, Simeon took the baby Jesus into his arms to bless him, and then spoke, not to Joseph, but to Mary about her child. When Jesus comes to the Temple at age twelve, only Luke shows Mary acting like a real parent, calling Jesus into account for his disappearing act. Only Luke depicts Mary "pondering [all these things] in her heart." Only Luke. No one else.

In time the significance of Mary increased exponentially as she became the subject of art, music, and literature. Numerous titles were bestowed upon her: The Blessed Virgin Mary, Mary the Mother of God, Mary the Queen of the Angels, Mary the Comforter of the Afflicted... Churches and cathedrals were dedicated to her honor: St. Mary's, Immaculate Conception, Notre Dame... Stories of her apparitions and miracles spread worldwide: Fatima, Loreto, Lourdes... Just last weekend, thousands of pilgrims flocked to nearby Des Plaines for the reopening of the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

However, the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformation called Mary's exaltation into question. Devotionally Martin Luther clung to venerating Mary, but worried she was replacing Jesus in too many hearts. John Calvin was far more severe. The iconoclasts smashed her sculptures, defaced her paintings, and deemed the adulation of Mary a heresy. Yet, despite Protestantism's attempt to bring Mary down off her throne, she remains more than a silent character in a pageant.

I grew up within the German stream of the United Church of Christ, with its deep Calvinistic roots. In those days parents worried about interfaith dating, and debate raged over electing a Catholic President. Both church and home taught me to be ambivalent about Mary – to see her as God's servant, but not to revere her as a saint...a figure in the Christmas creche, neither more nor less important than shepherds and magi.

But now I realize how much we need to take the theological understandings of Luke regarding Mary seriously. Luke neither ignores nor silences her. Luke sees her as called by God into critically important service. Luke does not see her as passive or subordinate, but as one with her own mind, heart, will, and voice, free to answer "yes" or "no" to God's call, capable of making her own choices about what happens to her body. Luke sees her as one who ponders, who thinks things through, and then says what she believes, her words deserving a hearing. Luke sees her as one who names the abusers of power and holds others accountable. Throughout his account, Luke sees women as equals to men. We would do well to restring our pearls of wisdom regarding Mary and remove every remaining vestige of sexism, patriarchy, and inequality from our world.

Our understandings of Mary's song, *The Magnificat* -- about "scattering the proud in the thoughts of their own hearts," "bringing down the powerful and lifting up the lowly," "filling the hungry and sending the rich away empty" -- also may need some restringing.

In my younger years, I understood today's scripture mostly as the inspiration for incredibly beautiful music. Bach, Buxtehude, Liszt, Mozart, Pachelbel, Purcell, Rutter, Telemann, Vivaldi, Vaughn Williams – their settings of Mary's song touched my heart and soul. But her voice never penetrated my mind or will. Kent-the-concertgoer couldn't hear the message for the music.

Mid-life, I finally began to hear Mary's song as an important prophetic oracle, as a vision of a great reversal, as judgment on those who have much and hope for those who have little. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer (the German theologian hanged by the Nazi's for speaking against the Third Reich) preached during Advent in the year 1933:

The song of Mary is the oldest Advent hymn. It is...the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary Advent hymn ever sung. This is not the gentle, tender, dreamy Mary whom we sometimes see in paintings; this is the passionate, surrendered, proud, enthusiastic Mary who speaks out here. This song has none of the sweet, nostalgic, or even playful tones of some of our Christmas carols. It is instead a hard, strong, inexorable song about collapsing thrones and humbled lords of this world, about the power of God and the powerlessness of humankind. These are the tones of the women prophets of the Old Testament that now come to life in Mary's mouth.<sup>iii</sup>

I still hear Mary's words as powerfully prophetic. But, on this Sunday when we light the Advent candle for love, I am restringing pearls with yet another dimension: that *The Magnificat* is at least as much about love as about judgment. "My soul magnifies the Lord," sings Mary; and her song acts like a magnifying glass, focusing attention upon what a loving God is doing through the birth of Mary's baby, born not to condemn the world, but to save it. As Baggot puts it:

Now I hear in Mary's words only God's extraordinary love for us... [God's] is a love too powerful to sit by and allow us to be lost to heights of conceit or self-centeredness... A love too powerful to sit by and allow us to be lost to depths of poverty or depression or despair. We are [in God's love] the priceless pearls that need, for our own good, some periodic reshuffling, resorting, and restringing...too valuable and too beloved [for God] to risk losing."

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<sup>i</sup> Baggott, Casey. "Learning to Focus," Day1. December 23, 2012.

<sup>ii</sup>Bozarth, Alla. "Before Jesus," from *Accidental Wisdom*, iUniverse 2003 and *This is My Body -- Praying for Earth, Prayers from the Heart*. iUniverse. 2004. Reformatted to meet space limitations.

<sup>iii</sup> Quoted by Elizabeth Johnson in "Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary," January 27, 2011. <https://uscatholic.org/articles/201101/mary-mary-quite-contrary/>.