

Mary's Song Explained

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC

August 29, 2021

Text: Luke 6:27-38

So, I sort of had one of those experiences getting ready for today's service that is every pastor's nightmare. At least it's on the list of nightmares, possible worship fiascos that can take Sunday morning completely off the rails. It's not the worst one, certainly. But unsettling, nonetheless. What was it, you ask? Well, when I sat down to write this sermon, I suddenly realized that I had given Carol the wrong sermon title. I had originally planned to speak on the Magnificat, Luke's account of the song Mary sings when she realizes she will give birth to the Christ Child. That lyrical text is all about God's promises and, while out of sync liturgically, it seemed a fitting one to use for this final sermon in this brief series on God's promises. The only problem is that when I reread that text early last week as I sat down to finalize the Worship Resource, it suddenly just didn't speak to me in the same way it had. It was just too "adventy." So I changed the text to another one in Luke, the one which parallels Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. I even had a different sermon title down originally – one that went perfectly with the Luke 6 text. Only problem is that when I was reviewing the draft of the Worship Resource before sending it off to Carol, I saw that title and changed it. I changed it to the one you see in the Worship Resource this morning – *Mary's Song Explained* – the original title I had planned for this Sunday. So, I'm either preaching the wrong sermon or Lynn just read the wrong text. Sigh... You see my dilemma.

Except, as I worked with the Luke 6 text, I realized that, through serendipity – or the grace of God as I like to think of it – this sermon really isn't wrong because the text from Luke 6 is exactly that – *Mary's Song Explained* by no less than Jesus himself. What do I mean by this? Mary's song, also known as the Magnificat -- is a literary device used by the author of Luke to foreshadow who Jesus would become. I do not believe the young

virgin Mary suddenly broke into song about her plight like Julie Andrews did in *The Sound of Music*. No, this was Luke setting up all that was to follow in his Gospel account of the life of Jesus. He was trying to convince us that even this naïve young girl knew how extraordinary the child she carried would be, that this man would be unlike anyone else who had ever lived, that this truly was the Son of God. How does Mary's song do that? First Mary sings about how blessed she is to have been chosen by God for the remarkable gift of giving birth to this child: "from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me." That's the "Magnificat" part of Mary's song. But then she gets in to the real meat of the matter – what will be the result of this gift God has bestowed on her? What will this child to be born accomplish in God's name, on God's behalf? And then Luke gives us a list:

Scatter the proud
Bring down the powerful from their thrones
Lift up the lowly
Fill the hungry with good things
Send the rich away empty.

A lot of things to ponder in this list, but most interesting to me is why the actual text is written in the past tense, as if it already happened. How could that be when the child who was to accomplish all this in fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham and his descendants had not even been born yet? That, dear ones, refers to the "already and not yet" vision of Jesus himself. Jesus taught his disciples that the Kingdom of God, God's vision of shalom, peace and justice for all, was already unfolding in his presence on earth. Jesus taught that he himself was the proof of this already, not yet new reality God envisioned for God's people. God's Kingdom, grounded in love and focused on justice, was already here in him. It was not and never was just a vision of how things would be at the end of time.

The thing is, though, that this already, not yet kingdom of God clearly was NOT the people's every day reality. That was obvious to his listeners. The proud were still haughty. The powerful were still brutally occupying all the seats of power. The lowly were still on the bottom of everything. The

hungry were still hungry. The rich still had their hands full to overflowing. So, what the heck happened to the promise of Mary's song? Where did it go? What happened to it? That's where today's text fill in the picture. This is Jesus himself telling the people who followed him everywhere, hanging on his every word, what had happened to the promises of God Mary named in her song before he was born. "But I say to you listen!" he begins. Then he gets right to the heart of the matter. He says, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." Say what? This doesn't sound like much of an explanation of what happened to all those fancy promises.

Well, yes and no. It actually is THE explanation of what happened to all those promises – promises that the proud and the haughty and the rich would be brought low and the lowly brought high as the hungry are fed. What exactly does loving your enemies have to do with any of that? Why should I have to do good to people who hate me? Why should I bless the people who curse me? Why should I pray for the very people who keep me as the lowest of the low? These people seem to revel in my pain and suffering and now you are telling me to pray for them, to do good to them, to bless them, to love them? Are you crazy, Jesus??? Sounds that way, but no, Jesus is not crazy. Jesus is anything but crazy. Jesus just gets it, gets the way the world works, and he is telling us that changing the way the world works is up to us, each and every one of us. We are the ones to change the world, one tiny moment at a time, one person at a time, one action at a time. What we do matters! Loving the very people who want to hurt you, who hate you, is the only way to begin to change the world. Maybe you won't change those specific evil people – too many lessons from human history have taught us that – but you will change some hearts and minds. You will make a difference. You will shift the sands under their feet by refusing to give in to the same hate which greets and devalues you. "Do to others as you would have them do to you," Jesus tells us. And he's not kidding. Love, do good, bless, pray – these are the actions that change hearts and minds. These are the actions that change the world.

The only problem is too often this feels like an impossible dream. Jesus understands our despair and reminds us of one basic reality. What other hope do we have to make the world into the place we so desperately want it to be other than to do it ourselves? “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you?” Jesus asks us. Even these mean people do that. You’re no different from them if you do the same. In fact, things will be that much worse because there will be one more mean, selfish person added into the mix which is already too thick with people who just don’t care. The world does not need any more people who don’t care, Jesus says. The world needs people who do care, people ready to love their enemies, to do good in all situations, to lend, expecting nothing in return. The world needs more people ready to stand up for justice for all, not just for the privileged few. The world needs more people willing to step up and step out in faith and love. At the very least, the world needs more people who are at least willing to try. Will everyone do it? No, not hardly, and Jesus knows this which is why he also reminds us that God is “kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.” In other words, God loves them and – here’s the truly hard part – God expects God’s own beloved – us – to do the same. We are in fact called to be merciful just because the God we claim to love and follow is merciful. In other words, dear ones we are called to be the people God created us to be, needs us to be. Now there’s a daunting expectation. Be kind and loving like God. Be merciful like God. What? God expects me to be kind and loving to anti-vaxers putting me and my kids and grandkids at risk? God expects me to love rude people who refuse to wear a mask and insist their rights are more important than anyone else’s?

In a word, yes. Yes, that is exactly what God asks of us. That is precisely what God expects of us. But how do we do that? How do we move beyond our own anger and rage at so many things that confront us every single day? Well, perhaps the first step is remembering one more thing Jesus taught the people in the text we read today: “Do not judge and you will not be judged; do not condemn and you will not be condemned.” Let’s face it – we get angry because we get caught up in our own sense of right and wrong. We are quick to judge, quick to condemn whether we have all

the facts of not. And Jesus says quite simply, knock it off. Now. Don't judge – love. Don't condemn – do good. Not sure what to do? Pray. Pray always. Pray for wisdom, for patience, for the ability to love the unlovable person standing in front of you being a jackass. Will it work? Maybe. Maybe not. The thing is that even pausing a little bit to consider the possibility of loving the unlovable is progress. It's movement in the right direction. And that, dear ones, is everything. Change begins in single, brief moments that clump together and build up over time. Change begins when hearts shift and minds open. Change begins when we dare to forgive as we have been forgiven, when we give without reservation. Only then will we experience the true, life changing miracle of Jesus' promise as he explains how Mary's song becomes real: "A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back."

The measure you give will be the measure you get back. That's what Mary was singing about. Society is upended when we give love, kindness, justice and mercy without reservation. The power to scatter the proud and bring down the lofty will lift up the lowest of the low and feed even the hungriest person and this power has been in our own hands all along, placed there by God's own self. All we have to do is remember that the measure we give will be the measure we get back. We get back the love we give away. Maybe not in the same way we give it. Maybe not even from the same people. Does this mean we are supposed to ignore injustice when we experience it, just for the sake of this love Jesus preaches? No. Absolutely no. Love requires always that injustice be confronted and vanquished. The haughty are to be brought down. The unjust are to be removed from power. The kind of love Jesus taught, that Jesus preached, that Jesus lived, is always, always life affirming. This love draws out the best in people. This love creates the desire to do good, to bless and pray for others. This life changing, radical love is only possible as a true gift from God that we in turn share with each other. Truly, the measure you give is the measure you give back.

So, I hope you will carry Mary's ancient song in your heart this morning. I hope you will see in these words God's living promise to you that life is worth living, that love is worth giving and that no one is more precious to God than you at your best moments, and at your worst. That, dear ones, is truly good news, worthy of sharing with everyone we know. Let's get started. Amen.