

HOLY TROUBLEMAKERS & UNCONVENTIONAL SAINTS



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KATE CHRISTENSEN- MARTIN



KATE CHRISTENSEN-MARTIN IS A PASTOR WITH A POWERFUL VISION OF HOW mothering will save the world. Most of us hear the word “mother” and picture a woman holding a child, but when Kate talks of being a “mother” and “mothering,” she includes everyone. She believes in the incredible love mothers have for their children. But she also uses “mothering” as a verb, like “running” or “singing.” Mothering is an action. Mothering is the act of nurturing someone else and fiercely protecting that person’s core essence so that person can flourish.

With that definition of motherhood, anyone of any **gender** can be a mother. In fact, Kate likes to point out that Jesus, whom **Christians** believe is the best example we have of what God is really like, acted as a mother. Jesus touched those who were sick and hurting. He took time to stop whatever he was doing to listen to people, especially people who had been overlooked or even rejected by their own families and religious leaders. He taught that God cared most about how we treated each other. And, at times,





Jesus was a mama bear looking out for those the **culture** of his day wanted to hurt. “Jesus was a man who mothered the world,” Kate often says.

Kate comes to her vision of mothering partly through her own experience as the mother of four sons. But she also has experienced deep loss and grief when her own mother died when Kate was just 18. Kate grew up in Oregon, and her mother was diagnosed with a brain cancer when Kate was 12, so she spent most of her teenage years caring for her sick parent. She even took her senior year off from high school so she could serve as a nurse for her mother at the very end of her life. Her mother’s death left Kate grieving. She was surrounded by people from her family’s church who wanted to be helpful but said misguided things like, “You’ll see her in heaven.” Their words were meant to be comforting, but didn’t allow a young girl the emotions she felt at such a loss.

Kate married a pastor a few years later. Being a pastor’s wife in a **conservative** church opened her eyes to just how unfair life was for women, especially in churches. “Being a pastor’s wife made me a **feminist**,” she now says. “I was miserable inside.”

A “pastor’s wife” is one of the few job descriptions in which someone is identified by their spouse’s job. After all, we don’t refer to a woman as a “lawyer’s wife” or a “chef’s wife.” And only women have this role because in very conservative churches like Kate’s, men were—and still are—the only ones who are allowed to pastor. “Pastor’s wife” isn’t a paid job; it’s just a lot of expectations that involve showing up every week to support her husband, volunteering to help with church events and programs, hosting people, and generally being available to church members.

Kate started to learn about how **Christianity** came to be so unfair to women. The system that teaches that women are less able, powerful, or intelligent than men is many hundreds of years old, and it’s called **patriarchy**.

The early followers of Jesus, however, had many women leaders because there were a number of women in Jesus’ inner circle, including Mary Magdalene, another woman



named Mary, Martha, Salome, and Susanna. The early church also had women like Junia, Phoebe, Priscilla, and Julia; Paul writes about them and commends their leadership in his letters. But gradually in the midst of a larger culture that was patriarchal, the church shifted, and male leaders pushed women out of leadership.

Kate read a lot about a man named Augustine who became an important bishop in 396 AD. He helped to establish the idea of **original sin**, a concept that had not been taught by Jesus and was never embraced by Eastern Christians or any of the other **Abrahamic** faiths. Augustine thought that humans were always inclined towards evil since Adam and Eve ate the fruit

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in the Garden of Eden, and he thought this inclination towards evil was physically passed from women to their children. The root of humanity's problems, according to Augustine, could all be traced back to women. Augustine had a rather wild and crazy younger life, and he had felt hurt in love in relationships with women. His bitterness towards women, combined with his powerful position and his ability to write convincingly, resulted in women becoming even more **marginalized** within the Christian church.

Kate learned that the movement Jesus started included women, children, and everyone who knew what it was like to be mistreated by the people or organizations in power. But things changed when the Emperor Constantine declared Christianity the official religion of Rome in 313 AD.

As the institution of Christianity gained more and more power, money, and influence, it started to operate in ways that Jesus would scarcely have recognized. Kate realized that what Christianity had done to women and other vulnerable people would have been exactly the kind of injustice that would have made Jesus angry, as he was when he flipped over the tables in the temple (Matthew 21:12-13).

At first, this growing awareness of the harms of patriarchy—for both men and women—made Kate angry. Then she got to work. She stopped being afraid to speak her mind. She started to see her **convictions** as a **calling** from a God who actually saw her mind and spirit as fundamentally good and worthy. This coincided with her husband's growing conviction that the way most Christian churches thought about and treated **LGBTQ** people was wrong, so even though they now had four young children, they left the secure paycheck and started a new church in their living room.

From the beginning, they decided it would be a place where everyone belonged, as long as they believed that all were welcome. Nobody had to pretend to have everything figured out. People who weren't even sure they believed in God were still welcome. Kate frequently reminded people that they celebrated the **original blessing** of the Divine image in every person. She knew that we can forget sometimes that we are created in the image of the Divine, and that church can be a wonderful space to help remind ourselves and each other of that Divine blessing that is our true essence. "God created you, and She proclaimed you good," Kate reminds people.

Did you notice that Kate used a feminine pronoun for God? For many people, referring to God as "She" or "Her" takes a little getting used to. We've all grown up in a culture that has put women in a lesser position for thousands of years, and everything from music to art to movies to church teachings reflect that history. But Kate loves to help people remember the many times in the Biblical texts in which God is referred to with feminine imagery and even feminine grammar.

In the **Genesis origin** poem, for example, God's Spirit is said to hover over the waters. And the word for Spirit is feminine. God creates humans in God's image, male and female. (Genesis 1:27). God is said to gather God's people like a mother hen gathers her chicks under her wings (Matthew 23:37).

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God gives birth and nurses us at God's breast (Hosea 11:3-4; Isaiah 49:15). In fact, one of the titles for God is "El Shaddai," which can be translated as, "The Many-Breasted One," a reference to God nourishing and sustaining Her people like a mother nursing her baby. The spirit of God that resides with the children of Israel in the tabernacle in the wilderness is called **Shekinah**; She is feminine.

The Spirit of God is always referred to with feminine grammar. Whenever you read about the Holy Spirit in the **New Testament**, the Greek word is *Sophia*, a name we still use mainly as a feminine name. "I will send my Spirit to you. She will comfort you," is how some of the final words of Jesus to his followers should read in our Bibles. Even Jesus's reference to God as a father isn't meant to be a physical or biological description of the Divine. "Jesus called God father because people had been taught that God was far away and distant," Kate says. "Jesus wanted people to know that God is near, as near as a parent—a mother or a father—tenderly holding their child close."

Even with all of her own reading and personal faith shifts, Kate felt that she needed a reminder on her own body of the loving, mothering presence of the Divine. She had a painting of God called "Mother" on her wall, but it wasn't enough, so Kate had Her tattooed on her arm. "A friend drew Her early on in my journey of learning to see the feminine as good and as part of the Divine image. I used to look at Her every day on the wall. But I needed Her to be closer. I grew up having patriarchy ingrained in me, and I needed an image of the Mother ingrained on my body too."

Kate continues to pastor, teach, and mother, both her own children and those in her church community. When she needs reminding of the strong, infinite arms of love that embrace us all, she just looks at that tattoo of Mother on her arm. Resting in that nurturing love of the Mother helps Kate call everyone into mothering others like Jesus did. As she likes to say, "Go be a mother."

How might seeing God as a Mother affect the way you pray?