

Candace Galik
Fourth Sunday of Advent
Micah 5:2-5A/Hebrews 10:5-10/Luke 1-39(46-55)
20 December 2015
St. Augustine's-in-the-Woods

SHE WHO POINTS THE WAY

Mary, Blessed Art Thou among Women.

The woman of more titles than anyone in Scripture, with the possible exception of her son. Well over 100, mostly poetic or popular piety -- House of Gold, Morning Star, Mother of Sorrows, Comfort of the Afflicted, Queen of Angels, Queen of Peace, Queen of Prophets.

And while most of these are now found only in the Roman Catholic Church, there is one title on which Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Anglican agree: *Theotokos*, "birth-giver of God," established as dogma by the Third Ecumenical Council at Ephesus in 431.

What Ephesus affirmed was this: Jesus is a Child of Mary and the Son of God. He is fully human, and fully divine.

And to quote a classmate of mine from seminary who, after studying weeks of various heresies and early Church councils and too many Greek words, asked the question that she was not alone in thinking:

"Who cares?"

(I should say she was studying for ministry in the Unitarian Church. No Episcopalian would ever think of asking such a question).

After we stopped laughing, mostly in relief at the opportunity for allowing our brains to relax, the professor wanted us to answer this for ourselves. Why does a fixed theological identity matter for her, or for the child we meet today in the womb and who will meet us two thousand years later?

And my answer then, and more so over the years, is simply this: Because we too are human and divine. This is the gift of *Theotokos*. The theology set forth at Ephesus-- a once important city in Turkey, now extinct -- is at its heart a mystical one, and Mary holds this title, too: Mystical Rose, the first human to truly experience union with the Divine.

Luke painted a portrait of Mary with words in his Gospel, but in legend he is also credited with painting an icon of the Mother of God. A specific portrait with yet another title: *Hodegetria. She Who Points the Way.*

In this icon, Mary holds her child in her left arm, as she gestures to him with the free right hand. In turn, the Christ Child answers his mother's intercessory prayer by raising his right hand in blessing. For 300 years, from the 12th to the 15th century -- to put it in perspective, that's longer than the United States has existed -- pilgrims journeyed to Constantinople to witness the icon as it was carried through the streets. Written records of pilgrims writing in Latin, Greek, Old Russian, Old Spanish, all tell the same story.

Every Tuesday the icon, extremely heavy, was carried on the shoulders of a special family whose duty this was. Not surprisingly, their name was, the "Tribe of Luke."

Who cares? Because the purpose was to carve out a sacred space within the profane commercial place. This most profane place, it was believed, could be transformed into the most sacred. Miracles, it was testified, occurred almost every time, or perhaps *She Who Shows the Way* pointed to the place always existing but they could not see.

This building, its walls, its floor, its roof, its doors -- this is sacred space. And so are its people, within its doors, and those who will never step inside these doors.

In Mary's body, the sacred took form, and grew, and gave birth to a new world. As in hers, so in ours. But the difficulty, of course, is that we can't separate what is profane from the holy. This is what happens when we allow God into our selves. Our image of self changes, shrinks, becomes impossible to find. Can my right hand be holy and not my left? Can some people be made in the Divine Image, and others not? Can I say everyone to my right is merely human, and everyone to my left is purely Divine?

So many questions. The problem, I think, is that we don't see the way as often as we can, not even for a moment on Tuesdays.

Playing a hand of poker may help. Let me explain.

Many years ago, I played poker with my family. This was not cutthroat gambling, but penny-and-two, so that by the end of the evening it was almost impossible to win, or lose more than than today's cost of a latte.

Even so, my grandfather was a serious player. He agreed to play with his non-professional family and neighbors only to please my grandmother, who organized these events less out of interest in cards than as another opportunity to open her door, to eat and drink, to share stories. Some sad stories, some joyful, mostly filled with the laughter of release and relief.

And, occasionally, she would look at her cards, and, frequently, she would be the big winner of the night.

On this occasion, I was about seven or eight years old and sitting next to my grandfather, trying to play as he taught me, with seriousness and purpose.

Across the table was my grandmother who, as usual, was having a wonderful social time without paying much attention to her cards. Even so, as the evening wore on, most of the pennies were piled in front of her, while my grandfather was down to a few coins.

In what became the last game of the evening, only my grandfather and grandmother were still in the game. He showed his hand: a full house which, in poker, is a very good hand. Interrupting my grandmother from her conversation, he told her to show her hand. Turning over her cards -- which I doubt she even looked at -- she shrugged and said, "oh, it's just two pair," which would not beat a full house.

If such a thing were possible, steam began streaming out of my grandfather's ears. Others at the table began laughing as they saw the revealed cards.

In a sense, it was two pair. But the winning combo wasn't two of a kind. It was two complementary pair -- four of a kind. Four aces, one of the best hands, and always beating a full house.

As she swept the pile of pennies towards her, she just shook her head in disbelief, amazed and surprised and laughing as always.

My grandfather wasn't laughing. Instead, he threw down his full house and shouted, "I do not play with amateurs!" and left the table.

Professionals are those who are in the game for victory and for profit. They will not go far on the spiritual journey. They are hampered by rules, plans, beliefs, and destination. They want to see others holding a weaker hand, a hand of two pair, a hand they can beat. United, the two pair become one, unbeatable, undivided, and, yes, unimaginably whole.

Amateurs know the game is about showing up for the love of it. They might not see that they are holding what cannot be separated, not at first. But when they do -- oh, everything on the table rolls their way, and they can't help but laugh in amazement and joy.

Mary was an amateur whose subsequent titles reflect what she might have been, what she might have felt. Some days, Mother of Sorrows. Other days, Queen of Peace. This is life lived as human, as Divine. Always, this is the Way.

In her life, she never had any title other than the name with which she was born. *Miryam*, a Hebrew word without a clear origin or meaning, but common among the Jewish population of the time. Christian theologians have tried to find a root justifying her name as a synonym for perfection, or beauty, but that is a conclusion more dogmatic than linguistic.

Rabbinic authority generally agrees that the likely meaning is "bitter." Not as in someone feeling angry or resentful, but in reference to a taste, a strong taste not found in ordinary food. The taste of grief, but also a taste that awakens. Such food is for the brave. Such food imparts its strength to those who did not fear it.

Mary had the strength to know that she and her child would suffer. This was real. Because they were human. But she also had the strength found only in union. No icon ever depicts Mary without Jesus. She will never again be separate from the Divine. Which means

someday, with God's help and human desire, suffering will no longer be the dominant taste. This, too, is real.

And in a few days we will once again celebrate the One who came unexpectedly into our lives, the Child of Mary and the Son of God, the real who makes us holy. The real who *is* the Way.

And the people say...

