

## The Tender Offices of Motherhood

Rev. Dorothy Boulton

John 1: 1-12

On January 12, 1915, the U.S. House voted against giving women the right to vote, 204 to 174. One representative, Martin Dies, gave the reasons for his opposition. First, “because it would thrust the ballot into the hands of millions of ignorant negro women of the South.” It would also “force unsought political burdens upon millions of home makers throughout the land who are at present more profitably employed than in running after politics.” His further addition to such racist and misogynist remarks were that he feared that it would create a “race of manly women” who would be “too stern for the tender offices of motherhood” while creating a race of men who would “not be ferocious enough” for the Army.

Another lawmaker, Stanley Bowdle, voted against it because, he claimed, “women didn’t show enough of a ‘magnificent interest in the world’s affairs.’” “Yes, Mr. Speaker,” Bowdle said when he declared he’d be voting against women’s suffrage, “the women of this smart Capital are beautiful; indeed, their beauty is positively disturbing to business, but they are not interested in affairs of state.”<sup>1</sup>

I discovered this information in this past week’s Washington Post newspaper. Since I was ruminating on today’s message, the words from the article, “the tender offices of motherhood” leapt out at me. I’d been reading and learning about various mothers, you see, whose lives and legacies were anything but fragile, uninformed, uncaring or uninvolved. Instead, I believe those lawmakers were right to fear a woman’s power, a mother’s influence. Women have been shaping the world through their choices, their actions, and yes, through their raising of children – their own, and children in their communities – despite attempts to push them to the margins.

This morning, as we celebrate the life of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and as we read this text from the gospel of John, it is fitting to notice and to celebrate and to emulate the mothers; mothers who are relegated to the background of the story, but are nonetheless present and powerful in what they believed, and how they acted, and how this shaped and formed their children, leading to a transformation of lives, transformation of society, and transformation of the world.

Let’s begin with Mary. In the gospel of John, Mary makes her first appearance in chapter two. There is no birth narrative in John. No angels, no shepherds, no song of protest, not even Joseph. She appears here early in chapter two as she, known as the

“mother of Jesus” and her son are at a wedding in Cana, a town nearby to Nazareth. She doesn’t get called by name, here. Known as “the Mother of Jesus,” – which is a perfectly honorable title given to a woman whose firstborn is a son, she points out to Jesus that, during the festivities, the wine has run out. It is all gone. “They have no wine.” Jesus, perhaps because he’s tired, or because he’s still dancing, replied, “Mother, my time hasn’t yet come.” I admit that I am relying heavily on my own experience here and reading way too much into the text, but if you have ever been in a parental role, that this sounds remarkably like, “You can’t tell me what to do.” Yet, right away, she issues a command to the servants: “Do whatever he tells you.”

You’ve heard the rest of the story: immediately Jesus instructs the water jars used for religious cleansing to be filled, and the contents served. The servants and steward discover that the water has become wine – fine wine! – “the best has been saved for last!” It is, in John’s gospel, Jesus’ first miracle. And we are told that Jesus did this and revealed his glory and his disciples believed in him.

It is the first of what’s known in John’s gospel as the “signs,” the revealing of who Jesus is, and the continual promise of God’s transforming power. They point to the faithfulness of God – that God is present, that God will save. Through these signs, Jesus shows the extravagance and abundance of life in the realm of God.

In John’s gospel, the persons surrounding Jesus are never marginal. On the contrary, they are important. Think of Jesus’ encounters with Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman at the well, the sisters Mary and Martha, Lazarus. I don’t think that the mother of Jesus is marginal in this text either, although I confess that the commentaries often wish to make her so. On the contrary, it is Mary who sets all this in motion. She is the one who sees the need. She is the one who communicates clearly and directly to her son, knowing and trusting that he is the one to meet it. And though there is hesitation on Jesus’ part, she nevertheless persisted, and instructs the servants to “do what he tells you.” She is the one who sees, who prepares, who prods, who plans – who believes that the promises of God are ready to be revealed.

I love the observation of Jan Richardson as she describes Mary as “a woman who knew something of miracles.”<sup>2</sup>

We know something of the fierce and tender offices of motherhood. Mary raised her son. From birth through all his young years, she was the one who shaped his imagination with stories of the Hebrew Scriptures. Stories of a God who covenanted with God’s people, promising that God would always be faithful. A God who saved the people when they were “way down in Egypt’s land.” A God who called to Moses and

said lead my children to the Promised Land. A God who parted the seas so the children of Israel could make their way to freedom. She told him stories of people – men and women – who wrestled with God, who served God, and even those who disobeyed, or argued or ran away from God. The prophets were part of those stories: prophets who called for justice that rolled down like water, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. And she told him of the Messiah, of the expectation that God would deliver God’s people from oppression and bondage. She told him that God promised life – life abundant, a life of freedom and peace.

As we will sing in the hymn in just a minute:

*“A mother laid her baby in a manger lined with straw,  
in the shepherd’s story, his call from God foresaw.  
She nurtured him and taught him the way that he must live.  
God’s people had a savior. She had such love to give.”*

A Mother Lined a Basket, Mary Nelson Keithahn

Mary believed. Mary trusted. And Mary acted. The time had come.

The text we are given from the lectionary ends at verse 11, but I read it through to verse 12. “After this Jesus went to Capernaum with his mother, his brothers, and his disciples, and they remained there a few days.”

Mary traveled with Jesus. She was part of his ministry. We see her next, in the gospel, at the foot of the cross. She is there as she has been all along. A mother, tender, fierce, part of the salvation story. The disciples began to believe in him, the text says. Mary was there first.

Anna Malaika Tubbs has a dedication at the beginning of her 2021 book, “The Three Mothers: How the Mothers of Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and James Baldwin Shaped a Nation.” (Flatiron Books, 2021)

The dedication reads:

This is for the mamas  
You deserve respect, dignity  
And recognition  
I honor you  
I celebrate you  
I see you

In this book, she delves into the lives of three mothers – all of whom outlived those famous sons named in the title. The women are Alberta Williams King, mother of Martin Luther King, Jr., Louise Little, mother of Malcolm X, and Berdis Baldwin, mother of poet James Baldwin.

Reflecting on why she decided to explore their stories, she writes, “Their lives did not begin with motherhood; on the contrary, long before their sons were even thoughts in their minds, each woman had her own passions, dreams, and identity.” She points out, “Each woman was already living an incredible life that her children would one day follow.”<sup>3</sup>

Each woman, we come to discover, profoundly shaped the life of their sons, the lives of all of their children, and the lives of their communities. I admit I didn’t know the name of Martin Luther King’s mother until I read the book. Like many, I’m a person who is described by Martin’s sister Christine as she said:

“Every now and then, I have to chuckle as I realize there are people who actually believe (Martin) just appeared. They think he simply happened, that he appeared fully formed, without context, ready to change the world. Take it from his big sister, that’s simply not the case.”

She says, “We are the products of a long line of activists and ministers. We come from a family of incredible men and women who served as leaders in their time and place, long before (Martin) was ever thought of.”

In the book, we learn that Martin was taught at the dinner table – by both his parents – about “the injustices of segregation” and they were “reminded of the importance of doing their part in changing such inequities.” It’s described how the three children (Martin, and siblings AD and Christine) would “sit and commune with generations of their family members as they professed their faith, shared their wisdom, and planned their next moves in their ongoing fight against oppression, all while passing good food around the table.”<sup>4</sup>

Alberta raised Martin in a home of faith. A home filled with scripture. In a family that valued education, that taught the responsibility of working for change. She brought her understanding of the world – a world of oppression, of Jim Crow, of racial and gender discrimination in housing, politics, job opportunities, and economics – and sang out songs of protest and hope in her role as organist and choir director at Ebenezer Baptist Church.

I learned that her influence on Martin Luther King was ongoing and profound. He “consulted his mother in just about everything throughout his life.” She was there as he accepted his Nobel Peace Prize in Norway in 1964. And she, of course, was incredibly proud of him as he worked for freedom and civil rights, just as she was equally afraid of the dangers facing him, and his family, in the course of that work.

Alberta, as we know, outlived her son. Martin was killed by a bullet in Memphis on April 4, 1968. Two things I did not know. Her other son, Alfred Daniel, Martin’s brother – also an activist preacher – died fifteen months later. Following an urgent call by his son saying, “there was trouble at the house and he needed them to get there quickly,” they rushed over to find him mysteriously drowned in his swimming pool, despite the fact that he was a good swimmer.

Alberta lost two sons. And she also lost her own life to violence. On June 30, 1974, she was assassinated by a gunman as she played the organ at the morning service at Ebenezer Baptist. She was killed at the age of 69.

Anna Malaika Tubbs makes it clear that there is a direct connection between the heroic work of Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and James Baldwin and their mothers. “They carried their mothers with them in everything they did,” she writes. “They were products of what their families and environments taught them, and very specifically what their mothers taught them through both their words and their actions.” “These men gave credit to their mothers and had a deep understanding that they could not be who they were without the lessons they inherited.”<sup>5</sup>

As Malcolm X wrote, “The mother is the first teacher of the child. The message she gives that child, that child gives the world.”<sup>6</sup>

This is for the mamas. You deserve respect, dignity and recognition.

Though the work and witness of countless women have been ignored or pushed to the margins, there is one more mother who cannot go unmentioned. I’ve been watching a series on television, a documentary on the life and death of Emmitt Till, and of the courageous actions of his mother – another mother who lost her son to violent death – Mamie Till-Mobley. I commend it to you, and also the book with which shares its name, *Let the People See*.<sup>7</sup>

Mamie Till-Mobley is one of the Mothers of the Movement. In fact, her actions following the murder of her son, 14-year old Emmett Till, are counted as the beginning of the modern civil rights movement. Emmett, a young Black boy from up north, was brutally killed by two white men for allegedly whistling at a white woman deep in the land of cotton. Emmett's body was found days later so mangled and disfigured, that the undertaker had to promise that the casket would never be opened. His mother refused... and examined every inch of her beloved son's body... and then declared, "Let the people see what I have seen. I want the world to see what is going on in Mississippi."

A public, open casket funeral was held in Chicago, Illinois. By inviting people to come and see, it made a statement. It allowed people to see "the depth of barbarity" caused by institutional racism and White supremacy that was encoded into Southern culture. Quoting from the book, *Death of Innocence*, the documentary quotes Mamie's own words saying, "I understood now that this was about Emmett. People had to face my son and realize just how twisted, how distorted, how terrifying racial hatred could be. They would have to see their own responsibility in pushing for an end to this evil."

People were transformed by this moment. Those who came to see Emmett Till's body, those who read the accounts and saw the pictures in the newspapers, those who attended and followed the trial that took place in Sumner, Mississippi were transformed – their eyes were opened. And it was Mamie Till-Mobley's courage and commitment in facing down this evil that made the difference.

It is beyond inspiring to see the footage of Mamie arriving at the courthouse. Her poise, her elegance, her bravery in walking from the car – with no protection – (she had to be smuggled into the state because her life was at risk) – it takes my breath away.

Despite knowing that justice may not occur in that courtroom, Mamie Till-Mobley gave her testimony and faced down not just the two White defendants, but the encoded and structural racism of the entire state of Mississippi. As Michael Eric Dyson put it, "to speak eloquently and to be elegantly composed to tell her truth, she was Black girl magic and Black excellence rolled into one."

These Mothers of the Movement, these women of faith and courage and witness, sent their children out to live. The tragedy is that they also sent their children out to die. And it is right to grieve with them and for them. To acknowledge their pain and their loss.

We are grateful for their lives and for all they have done to show us how God asks us to live in the world: we are called to shape the imaginations of children, to tell them the stories of God's people, to witness to them by our own actions, so that they will know what it means to love and to serve; so that they will know how to act against injustice and how to work for peace. That they will know that God's power to redeem and heal and transform is still among us and through us and in us and despite us – thanks be to God!

What was revealed at that wedding at Cana? It was the beginning. The first of the miracles, the first of the signs that invite us to see Jesus' glory and believe in him. As disciples of the living one, Jesus, son of Mary, let us continue on in this journey of faith – to the cross and beyond.

And today we give thanks for those who started us on our journey, guided us, inspired us, led us, sacrificed for us: mothers, fathers, encouragers, teachers:

We honor you. We celebrate you. We see you.

Thanks be to God for all the saints. May we too, have love enough to give. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> In 1915, a U.S. congressman tallied how many women in D.C. read the newspaper, then rejected their right to vote. John Kelly. Washington Post. Jan 12 2022. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2022/01/12/newspaper-reading-woman-suffrage/>

<sup>2</sup> Epiphany 2: Marriage and Miracles, 1/12/2001. <https://paintedprayerbook.com/2010/01/12/epiphany-2-marriage-and-miracles/>

<sup>3</sup> "The Three Mothers: How the Mothers of Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and James Baldwin Shaped a Nation." Anna Malaika Tubbs (Flatiron Books, 2021). Discussion question 1.

<sup>4</sup> Tubbs, pg 127-148 (Part VI: Loving Our Sons)

<sup>5</sup> Tubbs, pg 149-178 (Part VII: Losing Our Sons)

<sup>6</sup> Tubbs, pg 179-200 (Part VIII: The Circumstances of our Death)

<sup>7</sup> Elliott J. Gorn, Let the People See: The Story of Emmett Till. 2018. Oxford University Press