

The Inheritance of Conscience from St. Mary.

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St. Mary's Episcopal Church, Anchorage, Alaska

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Today is our patronal (or *matronal, if you will*) Feast Day of Mary.

It is hard to know where to begin, with so many blessing visiting upon us through the years, and so much to celebrate about this crazy, blessed community of faith.

1. I love the fact that we strive to be **Intergenerational** in scope: Like the life of Jesus himself, on the steps of the Temple in Jerusalem, in the arms of the elders St. Simeon and St. Anna, to his own ministry, recorded in **Matthew 19:14** and **Mark 10:14**.
Jesus said, "**Let the little children come** to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these. I think we are on the right track every time we recognize that it is a sacred trust to hand down the essentials of the faith to the generations who will come after us, even as we have received the light of faith from our forbears in generations past. In that light, today I salute our teachers and youth formation leaders and mentors.
2. I love it, when here at St. Mary's, we trust in what God is doing on you in your unique spiritual journey, recognizing there are many paths and ways in which Jesus calls us to faithfulness and the fullness of life. To some, it seems a bit too unstructured, too vague, even "irresponsibly" ambiguous... But we here at St. Mary's hold that God is at work in you in ways we can never fully understand, and we place our trust in the power of God working in the human heart – your heart as well as in mine.
3. And I love the insight of St. Mary's: That **devotion to God and a having an active Spirit-filled social conscience are inseparable.**

To have a Spirit-filled social conscience is:

- To live as a disciple of Jesus, being a disciple who *makes* other disciples.
- To be rooted in our own baptismal covenant, to place our faith and trust in Christ, to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as our self, striving for justice and peace, and upholding the dignity of every human being.
- Not to seek to have "God on *our* Side," but in humility and prayer, to seek to be on *God's side*, while yearning deeply for that day of the heavenly feast when there will be no sides at all.
- To place the needs of others, esp. the poor, the marginalized, and the oppressed, the grieving, the broken-hearted, and the lost, the widow and the orphan both ahead of and alongside our own needs.

That we may love God above all things, and love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

WHY? Why do we live out the urgings, joys, and burdens of a God-formed social conscience?

Let us be clear:

By the Grace of God, we open ourselves to a Spirit-filled social conscience not because it fits some person or party's political or social agenda, but because we hold as paramount the dignity and the integrity of *each and every* person precisely because they are the holy handiwork of God, and they bear the indelible imprint of their Creator in their soul, something that can be distorted but never destroyed no matter how far one falls or is dragged down, nor how many wrong choices one has made in life, nor the social situation one finds themselves in.

This month, I celebrate twenty years of association with this community of St. Mary's, having been officially received into the Episcopal Church by Bishop Harris in 1988, in what is today our A-Frame chapel.

One of the many, many things I have come to love, and have grown spiritually because of, is the fact that, *at its best*, St. Mary's as a Christ-centered faith community, has risen (often with fear and trembling), to the call of God.

Last Sunday, the Holy Gospel was from the 14th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew: (*Matthew 14:25-33*)

During the fourth watch of the night Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. "It's a ghost," they said, and cried out in fear. But Jesus immediately said to them: "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." "Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water." "Come," he said.

Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!" Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?" And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God." (Matthew 14:25-33)

“Lord, if it is you, then call to me and I will come.” Jesus bids Peter, “Come!” Trembling, Peter steps out of the boat and onto the waves. At first he is OK, but in the realization of what he has done, and perhaps recognizing the immediacy of the wind and the waves, he begins to falter. Crying out to Jesus, his hand is immediately supported as Jesus takes hold of him...

At our best, we here at St. Mary's have said, “Jesus. If it is you, call and we will come to you.” At our best, we have had lived through moments of pure grace, far beyond the declarations and dictates of the Law, when we have prayed for and received, the courage of our convictions.

Several years ago, I travelled to be St. Mary's representative at the funeral of the Rev. Diane Tickell, ordained one of the very first women priests in the Episcopal Church. Even before her ordination, (what – 35 years ago?) she stood at the table of the Lord and served the people of God in this place.

Not that we *all* agreed with such things at the time. But at our best we were gentle with one another, and made room for the movement of the Spirit *on her own timetable* within each believer's heart. We showed forth the grace to love another in the midst of our differences, humbly placing both ourselves, and those we disagreed with, under the care, the sovereignty, and the guidance of God's Holy Spirit.

And today, at the present time, three of our St. Mary's family minister along the border; baptizing children, praying with the little ones and the elders, while the Federales, faces hidden behind bandannas for their own protection, gather in a circle around them, and the drug lords terrorize and intimidate everyone around them. Holy witness, compassionate service, dangerous ministry...

But as this is the day we celebrate the Feast of St. Mary, I wonder if we have ever made the connection that the gift of *both* Godly obedience and devotion *and* a Spirit-filled social conscience is a gift from God and an inheritance from each of our three beloved Marys.

Yes, Mary Magdalene, who knew more than any other, what it was to be misunderstood, marginalized, mistreated, and rendered invisible in the social structures of her time. Mary, who knew first-hand the life-changing power of the healing of the Son of God.

Mary of Bethany, Martha's sister, who did not disparage the busy-ness of ministry, but who knew intuitively that hospitality *for Jesus* and *in the name of Jesus* both began and ended sitting quietly in his presence with an unguarded and receptive heart.

And Mary the Mother of our Lord, dear Mary, whose heart bore the pain of living in the light of Truth...

Especially from Mary, whose son Jesus began his first public act of the proclamation of the Holy Gospel and revelation of heart of God, as he unrolled the scroll of the 61st chapter of the prophet Isaiah, in his own hometown, and read the words recorded in Luke 4:18-19:

18 "The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to release the oppressed,
19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."^[e]

(Isaiah 61:1):

Mary, who located herself and her son Jesus squarely within the sacred prophetic tradition with her famous song:

Mary's Song

46 And Mary said:
 "My soul glorifies the Lord
 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
 48 for he has been mindful
 of the humble state of his servant.
 From now on all generations will call me blessed,
 49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me —
 holy is his name.
 50 His mercy extends to those who fear him,
 from generation to generation.
 51 He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
 he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
 52 He has brought down rulers from their thrones
 but has lifted up the humble.
 53 He has filled the hungry with good things
 but has sent the rich away empty.
 54 He has helped his servant Israel,
 remembering to be merciful
 55 to Abraham and his descendants forever,
 even as he said to our fathers."

Scholars have only just begun to explore how Jesus' Spirit-filled social conscience was formed by the power and might of God, acting through his Blessed Mother. We are deeply blessed, and three times challenged to faithful by our beloved Mary's.

But at this time, we have bread to break and a cup of blessing to share.

So let us pray:

***Holy and Life-giving God, we celebrate this our Feast Day of St. Mary's:
 We give you thanks and praise for the opportunity to be blessed in this faith community, and the
 opportunity to be a blessing to others.***

***May the power and Spirit of Gracious, Almighty, and Living God form in us as well:
 hearts of deep devotion, minds of joyful inquiry, and lives of merciful holy conscience,
 and grant unto us the humility, grace, and fierce courage to act upon our beliefs and convictions.***

***As Peter cried out to Jesus: "Lord, if it is you, call me that I may come to you", may your Spirit give us
 passion, devotion, and obedience to step out of our own "comfort zones, to the realm of the unknown,
 where you are already holding out your hand"¹.***

***This we pray... in the name of the One Holy and Living God, His only Son our Lord, and the ever-
 present Holy Spirit, Amen.***

¹ Casting Crowns, 2007.