

Red Hot Mamas

Last August, as the newly constituted Deacon Board gathered at the Bloomberg's house for our annual planning retreat, we were going over the calendar for the year and someone pointed out that Pentecost Sunday and Mothers' Day fell on the same day. Something happened then that I know will surprise you all – a smart aleck remark occurred to me and I spoke it: "I guess I'll have to preach on Red Hot Mamas," I said. There was some laughter then and when I followed up on the threat this week by publishing that as my sermon title in our electronic newsletter, Marcia Patton was so delighted with the idea that she repeated it to Rev. Leslie Braxton, pastor of New Beginnings church in Renton, and he indicated that he might well preach the topic as well. So what started as a questionable *bon mot* has become a movement in Evergreen Baptist circles.

I'm sure you all realized that by "red hot mamas," I'm referring to women who have been imbued with the gift of the Holy Spirit, the women throughout the history of God's people who have supported the work of God in the world. I want to take some time this morning to remember that in the too-often male dominated history of both our world and our faith, crucial roles have been played by women. From the record of the earliest worshippers of Yahweh, through the times of the Old Testament, to the disciples of Jesus and the Early Church, our Scriptures are full of stories of faithful women. Our own Baptist heritage and denominational history has been shaped by women who were inspired by the Spirit and I rather strongly suspect that each one of us in this room could tell of more than one woman whose compassion, wisdom or piety helped to move us along in our own spiritual journeys. So let us take this day to celebrate women of faith together.

One of the delights of using this day to rejoice in the mothers of our faith is, of course, that God Godself is the ultimate mother of our faith. The mothering image is particularly strong in Scripture in connection with the Holy Spirit. As I've mentioned before, the Hebrew word for spirit, "*ruach*," is a feminine noun. In Genesis 1:2, some versions read, "the Spirit of God brooded over the waters." God's creation of the world is likened to the action of a mother bird tending her egg. Many other scriptures use a mothering metaphor for God and in Proverbs and in Ecclesiasticus or the Wisdom of Sirach, which is a book in our Apocrypha, God's Wisdom is personified as female. Indeed, Sirach also attributes the creation of the world to this feminine aspect of the God of Israel. The tradition of affirming the feminine nature of the Holy Spirit has resumed in recent years, too. Since it's been awhile since I made a U2 reference, I think I can safely point out that, for those with ears to hear, their song, "She Moves in Mysterious Ways," can easily be interpreted as being about the work of the Spirit.

I've preached before on the uppity women in the Bible and related what great delight I have taken in their stories and in the presence in my life of their spiritual descendents. There is also a substantial class of women in the Old Testament who might be termed "subversive heroines." In a male-dominated society, often the only leadership techniques left available to women are suggestion, indirection and even outright trickery. There are several stories in the Scriptures about women who use their "feminine wiles" to move God's agenda forward. Take, for instance, the case of Rebekah, the wife of Isaac. In a very modern-sounding story, Rebekah is barren for years, then becomes pregnant with twins, although as the result of prayer rather than fertility drugs. In Genesis 25:23, we read, "And the Lord said to her, 'Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder

shall serve the younger.” Remembering this, Rebekah takes action when her husband, Isaac, is nearing death and ready to give his blessing to his elder son, Esau. It is Rebekah who advises Jacob on how to surreptitiously stand in for his brother while Esau is off hunting in order to receive the blessing that will secure his dominance over his brother. Or consider the story of Miriam, who blithely recommended their own mother to wet nurse the baby found floating in the Nile by Pharaoh’s daughter. A child Pharaoh wanted destroyed brought up in safety on Pharaoh’s dime, thanks to the shrewd maneuvers of two Hebrew women.

The Old Testament even has stories of women who contributed positively and importantly to the history of God’s people through what can only be termed as seduction. There is a listing of Jesus’ ancestry in the first chapter of Matthew that includes four women prior to Jesus’ mother, Mary. One is Bathsheba, who apparently was an innocent victim in David’s plot to take her for his own, but the other three, Tamar, Rahab and Ruth, were women who knew their own minds and did what they had to do to assure their own survival. Rahab, of course, was the prostitute encountered in Jericho by the spies sent by Moses, who was brought into the camp of Israel as a reward for saving the lives of the spies. Tamar was the daughter-in-law of the patriarch Judah. If you are over 21 and not easily shocked, read her story in Genesis 38 some time. We often hold up Ruth for her faithfulness to Naomi, but her conquest of Boaz might well have earned her the sobriquet of “shameless hussy” in a less forgiving time. Without these women and their audacity, there would have been no King David or “great David’s greater son,” Jesus. And then there’s Esther, the only woman whose action is the basis of a holiday, Purim. Esther wins a beauty contest to become the newest queen of the King of Persia, then uses her beauty to influence him to spare her people and destroy their enemy. Red hot mamas, indeed! These sisters used what God gave ‘em to the greater glory of God. Can I have an “Amen”?

The word of God came to the prophet Joel, during one of Israel’s times of crisis; scholars cannot tell which one. Much of the book is warning the people of the destruction about to befall them because of their wickedness. But there is also promise for the future of God’s people. Chapter two, verses 28 & 29 say: “Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit.” It is a promise for a new equality among God’s people, possibly a reversal of the story in Genesis when Eve went from being Adam’s helpmeet, or equal, to being dominated by him. The apostle Peter remembers this promise on the day of Pentecost, when the Spirit comes to all of the disciples waiting for the promised Comforter in Jerusalem. We know from Luke’s account that those who were faithfully present included Mary, the mother of Jesus, as well as “the women.” Like any culturally-attuned man of the time, he doesn’t bother to name them.

We can make some pretty good guesses, though, about their identities, based on stories of Jesus’ ministry, just as Ann Hanson did in writing the litany we used earlier. Surely Mary Magdalene was present. The first to see the Risen Christ, the Apostle to the Apostles, she would undoubtedly have stayed in Jerusalem with the rest. Likewise with the other women that are recorded as having risked retaliation by the Romans and the Sanhedrin by witnessing Jesus’ death and by going to anoint his body on Easter morning: another Mary, Salome, and others. I can’t imagine that the devoted Martha and Mary of Bethany didn’t make the journey into Jerusalem to be with their friends and there were likely others, perhaps many others. Luke is

clear that all the disciples present that morning were anointed by the Spirit and since Peter was inspired to quote from Joel, we can be sure that both men and women were preaching and amazing the crowd.

Luke goes on, later in Acts, to give further testimony to the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy. As the physician is accompanying Paul from Ephesus to Jerusalem, prior to the Apostle's arrest and eventual imprisonment in Rome, the party stops in Caesarea. Their host there is Philip the Evangelist, one of the Greek-speaking believers who had been one of the first deacons in Jerusalem. According to Luke, Philip "had four unmarried daughters who had the gift of prophecy." At least in the early Church, there was no question about whether women could be preachers.

One often hears, because of the interpretation of specific verses in his letters, that Paul must have been a male chauvinist and opposed to women in ministry. Yet a careful reading of those same letters reveals that in nearly every one, Paul names and thanks women for their key roles in ministries around the Mediterranean. In the epistle to the Romans alone, he mentions 11 women as leaders in churches around Rome. He begins his list of greetings and thanks by commending Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae. Paul instructs the Christians in Rome to help Phoebe in whatever tasks she has, for she has been *προστάσις*, a protector, for Paul and for many others. It is likely that Phoebe herself carried the letter from Corinth to Rome for Paul. Next, Paul praises Priscilla and Aquila, a married couple from Ephesus. In the seven times this couple is mentioned in the New Testament, Priscilla is named first, a remarkable testimony at that time to her importance. According to Paul's letter to the Romans, all the churches of the Gentiles owe them great thanks. In Acts, we read that they were both great teachers, responsible for the training of Apollos, perhaps the greatest preacher named in the New Testament who had not been one of Jesus' original disciples. The list goes on and on. Anyone who would deny the importance of these Spirit-filled women, these red hot mamas, in the early days of the Church, simply isn't paying attention to the witness of the Scriptures.

Our Roman Catholic sisters and brothers are quite right to refer to the body of believers as Mother Church. The community of saints is usually the origin of our first steps towards faith and is at all times the place from which we draw the most nourishment in our spiritual journeys. Throughout the history of Mother Church, there have continued to be great women, often laboring in relative obscurity, whose witness continues to impact us as followers of Christ today. As I worked on this sermon this week, I spent some time listening to the beautiful music of Hildegard of Bingen, which never fails to both calm and uplift me. Hildegard, who lived from 1098 to 1179, was not only a brilliant composer but also a theologian, mystic and scientist, whose works were influential enough to make her an advisor to bishops, popes and kings at a time when women were routinely ignored. I have also benefitted over the years from the writings of Julian of Norwich, perhaps the greatest English mystic, who lived from 1342 to 1416. She is best known, of course, for the beautiful benediction, "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well," but her works have influenced theologians both Catholic and Protestant, from Martin Luther to the present. By the way, Lutherans and Anglicans celebrated her feast day this past Thursday and Catholics will do the same on Tuesday.

Closer to home, our Baptist tradition is marked by great women of faith. The poems of 18th Century writer Anne Steele were used by Baptists and other Christians as lyrics for hymns, including in the famous shaped-note hymnal, The Sacred Harp. The contemporary Christian band, “Jars of Clay,” has recorded updated versions of several of Steele’s hymns. More famously, one of the very first Baptist missionaries from America was Ann Judson, who accompanied her husband, Adoniram, and Luther Rice to India in the days when Baptists in America still collaborated in one Missionary Society. As a boy, growing up in Southern Baptist churches, I learned all about “the lovely Moon lady,” Lottie Moon, a missionary to China in the late 19th and early 20th centuries for whom the SBC’s annual Christmas-time offering for foreign missions is still named. The SBC also calls its annual Easter offering for Home Missions the “Annie Armstrong Offering,” after the woman from Baltimore who helped to organize Women’s Mission Unions in Maryland and across the South. Since I became an American Baptist, I’ve learned about women such as Mary Webb, whose work for missions in Massachusetts inspired Annie Armstrong and others; Joanna Moore, whose work among freed slaves after the Civil War greatly improved literacy and education rates among black women in the South; and Helen Barrett Montgomery, a suffragette colleague of Susan B. Anthony, who published the first translation of the Greek New Testament by a woman and later became the first woman president of the Northern Baptist Convention, the predecessor organization to our American Baptist Churches, USA.

The amazing work of those Pentecost-powered women inspires me but perhaps even more important to me were the smaller, quieter works of women in my own life, whose deep devotion to Christ fueled their influence over me as a boy and as a man. I long ago forgot the name but I’ll never forget the comforting presence of the grandmotherly lady who ran the nursery at Skycrest Baptist Church in Clearwater, Florida, who helped shape my earliest awareness of the church as a safe and nurturing place to be and of the people of God as my extended family. But I do still remember the names of saints such as Anne Olson, the librarian at Kirkwood Baptist Church, who not only encouraged me to read theological books that others might have said were “too grown-up” for a pre-teen boy but also welcomed me onto her volunteer staff as a junior but respected colleague. Or Gerri Gill, a fireplug of a woman who was KBC’s first woman deacon in the early 70s when such a position was still very rare in Southern Baptist Churches and who sometimes co-taught my Sunday School class with her husband, Roy. Speaking of pioneers, I cannot omit my dear friend Mother Helen Havens, one of the first women to be ordained a priest in the Episcopal Church, who, along with her husband, Sandy, my theatre director, and Jesuit Father Dave Borbridge, provided my spiritual grounding during my tumultuous college years. Helen, Sandy and Dave extended the love of Christ to me at a time when I needed it most.

In his second letter to his protégé, Timothy, Paul writes, “I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you.” Like Timothy, I owe a special debt of gratitude for the formation of my faith to my grandmothers and to my mother. Despite living through hard times economically, suffering with poor health and enduring the deaths of spouses and children and a host of other troubles, neither my Grandma Lucy nor my Granny Glaze ever wavered in her faith in God, in Christ and in the Baptist church. And I will always remember the quiet example of my Mother, who found solace in reading the Bible, who sang hymns in a clear, sweet voice, and who was so proud of me at my baptism and at my first, stumbling sermon, delivered when I was sixteen. Last week marked the

Red Hot Mamas

thirtieth anniversary of her passing, but the lessons she taught me about reliance on God will never fade. And I would be remiss if I did not mention the blessing of the faith of two further generations of women in my life. Connie's faith in Christ helped guide me back to the Church after a very dark time in my life and has helped to sustain both of us in times of trial and crisis. And now Colleen's growing maturity in the faith, as shown in her testimony in last week's 30-Hour Famine service and in yesterday's Herald, gives witness to the fact that she, like Timothy, can "set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity." (Boys, I'll have to find some other opportunity to say nice things about you.)

I hope that my reflections this morning have spurred similar considerations for all of you. Which women of faith have inspired you? Whose story in the Bible thrills you as you read it? Who do you think of when you think of women whose acts of faith have resounded down the years? Which women nurtured your faith and who continues to open up the love of Christ and the will of God for you? Who are your red hot mamas? Whoever they are, wherever they are, I hope you will take some time today to give thanks for them. Better still, if they are living and you can reach them in person, by phone or by e-mail, I hope you will take some time today to thank them as well as thanking God for them. And perhaps most importantly of all, be sure to hear them, when they prophesy, when God's spirit is poured out upon them and they speak truth. And then be sure to act on the truths they impart. For through the power of the Holy Spirit, who broods over creation like a mother bird, we are set free from our bondage to love all the children of God, our Mother and our Father, and to act to bring the world closer to being one Beloved Community. Thanks be to God.