

Not long after I announced this series of sermons inspired by the Rev. Alice Connor's book *Fierce: Women of the Bible...*, two women from the congregation (Ellen Hull and Fay Delli), independent of one another, recommended the novel by Sue Monk Kidd called *The Book of Longings*. It was published last year (2020). In it, Sue Monk Kidd imagines that Jesus had a wife with the bulk of their relationship occurring in the years about Jesus in the Bible that are silent. Remember he didn't appear on the scene until he was close to 30. For a slew of reasons Kidd names in her author's notes at the conclusion of the novel, the idea is not so far-fetched.

As we've come to understand Jesus as "the Word made flesh who dwelt among us" (John 1), Kidd pairs him with a woman of her own voice. Her name is Ana. She comes from a well-to-do family in the town of Sepphoris which neighbors Jesus' home town of Nazareth. Her status has given Ana access to an education of which she takes full advantage--reading and writing; cultivating her voice. She is an aberration among women of her time. Yet the more she reads scripture, the more she longs for the silenced voices of women to be brought to light.

Early in the book, Ana anticipates the arrival of a dear aunt, Yaltha, who sees and fully supports the bright young woman Ana is becoming. Ana is excited to show her aunt her writings:

"Not long before she (Yaltha) arrived, I'd begun writing down the stories of the matriarchs in the Scriptures. Listening to the rabbis, one would've thought the only figures worth mention in the whole of history were Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph... David, Saul,

Solomon . . . Moses, Moses, Moses. When I was finally able to read the Scriptures for myself, I discovered (behold!) there were women."

As the character Ana cared to reveal those women's stories, the author, Sue Monk Kidd, desired to raise the stories of the women around Jesus. Basing her fiction on what's written in the gospels, and studying texts outside of the Bible, and digging into the history of life during that period, she puts flesh on some of the women who are named, and some who are not named. I won't say too much more about *The Book of Longings* except to say I recommend it to you, if you can open your mind to the idea that Jesus enjoyed married life - even in the midst of what we know of him in the gospels.

One final scene from the book will launch us into this sermon and make sense of the Bruce Springsteen song we just listened to. Due to her outspokenness, Ana is forced to flee Galilee about a year after Jesus was baptized by John. She returns on the day we commemorate as Good Friday. In fact, the first she sees of Jesus is when he is being forced to carry the cross, on his way to his crucifixion on Golgotha. It is the moment when Jesus drops the cross when she rushes out to pick him up and they are able to see one another, and share a moment. Eventually of course, a Roman guard forces Jesus to continue and Ana is left behind. Ana narrates,

I called out in Aramaic, "I'm here, Beloved. I'm walking behind you."
The centurion twisted in his saddle and looked at me, but said nothing. Most of the spectators had hastened ahead of us toward the Gennath Gate that led to Golgotha, too impatient to wait on the man who was

taking one slow, agonizing step after another. Glancing behind me, I saw that the few who'd remained to walk with him were women. Where were these disciples of his? The fishermen? The men? Were we women the only ones with hearts large enough to hold such anguish?

All at once a cluster of women joined me, two on my right, two on my left. One took my hand, squeezing it. I was startled to see she was my mother-in-law (Mary). Her face was wet and shattered. She said, "Ana, oh, Ana." Next to her, Mary, the sister of Lazarus, tilted her head at me and sent me a steadying look.

At my other side, a woman slid her arm about my waist and gave me a wordless embrace. Salome (Jesus' sister). I grasped her hand and pulled it to my chest. Beside her was a woman I'd never seen before, with copper hair and flashing eyes, whom I guessed to be the age of my mother when I last saw her.

We walked pressed together, shoulder to shoulder. As we left the city gate and the hill of Golgotha came into view, Jesus halted, staring up at the little summit. "Beloved, I'm still here," I said.

He lurched forward, moving against the swell of wind.

"My son, I am here also," cried Mary, her voice shaking, the words shredding apart as they left her lips.

"And your sister walks with you as well," Salome said.

"It is Mary of Bethany. I, too, am here."

Then the unknown woman called, "Jesus, it's Mary of Magdala."

(pp375-6, emphasis added)

Of course, each of the gospels bears witness to the presence of these and some other women both at the foot of the Cross and at the place where Jesus was entombed.

*Were we women the only ones with hearts large enough
to hold such anguish?*

It is wholly fitting that 3 of the 5 women in this story are named Mary. The word in Greek, and its derivative in Hebrew, means both “bitterness” and “rebellion.”

If you didn’t already know this, allow it to sink in for a moment - the name Mary means “bitterness” and “rebellion.”

Consider Mary the mother of Jesus - the God-bearer. I think these words, spoken to her by the prophet Simeon when Jesus was consecrated in the temple as a baby, best sum up Mary’s accompaniment with her son:

“This boy is assigned to be the cause of the falling and rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that generates opposition (read “rebellion”) 35 so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your innermost being too (read “bitterness”).” (Luke 2:34-35)

Consider Mary the sister of Lazarus, who died and was raised by Jesus. She and her sister Martha, both enduring the bitterness of their brother's death, and yet who were the first to bear witness to the power of God to create life from death. Their home in Bethany served as a staging ground for Jesus’

teachings and for planning how to shake up the establishment in Jerusalem. A rebel headquarters, if you will.

Consider Mary of Magdala, who, through the tradition of the church, has been dragged through the mud. And yet, who Luke tells us, was one of Jesus' chief patrons. And, whom the gospels proclaim was the primary (in its literal meaning, **the first**) apostle - who upon either witnessing the risen Jesus or hearing about it from angels, broke the good news to the disciples, who were hiding -- *Where were these disciples of his? The fishermen? The men?* - indeed!

Recall our story about Ruth, from a couple of weeks ago, Jesus' ancestor. Her mother-in-law, Naomi, who's husband and two sons died in quick succession, leaving her without any social standing, tells Ruth to call her *Mara* - "bitterness" - for what she had endured.

Ruth, which translates as "friendship," made a covenant with Naomi--I'm sure you recall it:

"(In your bitterness), don't urge me to abandon you, to turn back from following after you. Wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. (Ruth 1:16)

Upon their return from exile to Bethlehem, Ruth's friendship grows into kinship, and together they rebel against their widowed status to create a future for themselves. A future that leads first to King David, and eventually to Jesus.

Finally, consider Miriam, the sister to Moses and Aaron, who helped lead the people of Israel out of captivity and into emancipation after passing through the Red Sea. Miriam's name is also derived from the root in Hebrew meaning "bitterness and rebellion." She is the "Mary" of whom Bruce Springsteen sang "don't you weep no more...Pharaoh's army got drowned...Oh, Mary don't you weep." The verses of this spiritual create a string of God's constant presence with the Marys of life who have, survived, rebelled, overcome, and made it to the shores of the "other side" into life.

Friends, we need to realize that without the Marys--and those who accompanied them--there would be no story of salvation.

Let me take the proper name out of that sentence and then let's hear it again:

Friends, we need to realize that without *the bitterness*
--and those who worked *to rebel against it*--
there would be no story of salvation.

Many people work so hard to try and create a life for themselves that is without sadness, disappointment, pain, and suffering. Yet the reality has always been that these things are part of what it means to be alive and to engage in loving relationships with others; often, even to exist in a society. Jesus, the Marys, and those in their movement sought to rebel against the Romans -- as Aaron, Moses, and Miriam rebelled against the Egyptians -- each Empire brought both cultural sophistication AND egregious human

rights violations to the lands they absorbed. We, in the United States, are uncovering more of our own mixed history of being a shining light of democracy for the nations of the world, while leaving a wake of destruction of Indigenous People, People of African Descent, and the Marys who have and continue to suffer within our own borders.

It is often out of these places of suffering and bitterness where we find faith-filled people who strive to overcome. I think of two different phrases offered by the Apostle Paul to those followers of Jesus living in Rome--the belly of the beast.

In Romans 5 Paul writes,

We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. 2 We have access by faith into this grace in which we stand through him, and we boast in the hope of God's glory. 3 But not only that! We even take pride in our problems, because we know that trouble produces endurance, 4 endurance produces character, and character produces hope. 5 This hope doesn't put us to shame, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

And, of course, in chapter 8:

In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38 For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor

height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

As we begin to bring to a close this series on the *Fierce* women of the Bible, I want us to claim the gift they have to offer us. Jesus' love was forged in the suffering of the world, and the strength he witnessed in the women who raised him, and reared him, who supported him, who challenged him, and who believed in him -- against all odds. When we consider church leadership through the ages, we often think of what we see in that hallway outside of the narthex - a gallery of white men; myself included. And yet we know better. In most households, the ones keeping lit the lamps of faith are women. Because so many of the world's cultures are dominated by men, women understand the partnership of suffering and bitterness to rebellion and salvation.

We dream of a better world. One built completely on equity and gratitude for the gifts God bestows on all people -- in fact on all Creation. So, next week, when we begin a new Church year, we will indeed start at the beginning, when there was God, and ALL was created in God's image. Honoring God in all the created world is what we should constantly be seeking to mold our lives after. In order to do so, we confess where we have not, repent of the places where we have participated in the suffering of others, and work towards building a family, a community, a church, a society where God is honored in the way we treat one another and the planet we inhabit.

Finally, as we come to the table today, may we do so receiving the bread and juice as a foretaste of the vision from the book of *Revelation* which bears witness to God dwelling once again with God's people.

(God) will dwell with them, and they will be (God's) peoples. God himself will be with them as their God. 4 (God) will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more. There will be no mourning, crying, or pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.

(Revelation 21:3-4)

Oh, Mary, don't you weep no more.....

Amen.