

Jesus said, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” And what are Jesus’ commandments? In the *Gospel of John* Jesus says, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” (John 13:34) Love one another as I have loved you. Before we can love ourselves or another person, we have to receive love. For many of us our first experience of love was from a parent who held us, supported us, fed us and kept us safe. Today we celebrate Mother’s Day. Many of us here came to know Jesus through our mother’s taking us to church or a woman taught us in Sunday school as a small child and nourished us on our faith journey. We each have women who have mothered us in some form throughout our lives. I’m wearing the alb and stole of a woman priest who guided me in my vocation as a new priest. She shared her love of following Jesus with me. She is one of my mothers in faith.

Paul, who we hear speaking to those who don’t know Christ in Athens in our first reading today, had many women who helped him in nourishing the churches that he planted on his travels. They learned that as Christ loved them, they could love others and the faith spread. When Paul arrived in places like Philippi in Macedonia there was no synagogue in the city. Which means that there were fewer than ten Jewish men in Philippi, since at that time there had to be at least ten Jewish men to have an assembly for worship. So Paul and his companions go outside the city to a place by the river where there is a place of prayer. He sits down as a rabbi and begins to speak with the women who are gathered there on the Sabbath. Lydia, a Gentile businesswoman appears to be the leader of the women who are gathered for prayer. There is no mention of a husband, she is the dealer of purple cloth, and the Lord opened her heart to hear the gospel, the good news that Paul is preaching. She then asks to be baptized, and not just herself, but her entire household are baptized. Lydia then asks Paul and his companions to “come and stay at my home.” The church in Philippi gathers in the home of Lydia. The first Christian church in Europe is in Lydia’s home.

Today is Mother’s Day. We often hear about our forefathers in faith, but we rarely hear about our foremothers in faith. This morning I would like to look at the women disciples who are our spiritual mothers. Those women who followed Jesus’ command to love one another as I have loved you. Who were these foremothers in faith? In all the gospels we hear of the women who supported Jesus in his ministry. From Luke we hear how Mary called Magdalene, Joanna, Suzanne, Salome, Mary of Bethany and Martha and many unnamed others provide for Jesus out of their own resources.

In the Gospel according to John, Martha makes the confession to Jesus that he is the Messiah, in contrast to the other gospels that have Peter stating that Jesus is the Messiah. Then Mary out of her great love for Jesus anoints his feet and wipes them with her hair prefiguring his death and burial.

Then we have Mary Magdalene, the Apostle to the Apostles. We could spend an entire morning looking at her as a leader of the early church. She was healed by Jesus, traveled with him and financially supported his ministry. She was never a prostitute, that was Pope Gregory the Great who started that story in a sermon in 591. In the early church Mary Magdalene was known as a spiritual leader, an apostle. Mary Magdalene is the only disciple who appears in all four gospels staying with Jesus as he is crucified. Jesus’ mother only appears at the cross in the Gospel of John. Mary is the model of faithfulness that every follower of Jesus is called to be. In all four

Gospels, Mary called Magdalene is the only person that appears in each of the stories of the women at the tomb. She is named 12 times in the Gospels, and yet we know very little about her. Mary called Magdalene is portrayed as standing by the cross, witnessing Jesus' burial, discovering the empty tomb and announcing the resurrection of Christ to his disciples. She is the first person that Jesus, as the Risen Christ, chose to speak with on the morning of the resurrection. In the midst of her grief, she was open to having her Lord and Savior, the person she loved appear to her and she believed. Jesus entrusted her with the message to go and tell the other disciples.

Then we have Jesus own mother, Mary, who gave all of humanity the example of how to be open to the love of God. Through her openness and love God became incarnate among us. She of all people has given us the example of true discipleship.

From Mary called Magdalene and the other women who were with Jesus in his ministry the faith spread through their loving others as Jesus loved them. They helped to mother the new faith into existence. So when Paul began his ministry of planting faith communities that followed the Way of Jesus, he like Jesus had women involved in planting the faith communities in their homes.

Who were the other women that Paul met and ministered with? Paul entrusts his *Letter to the Romans* to Phoebe, a deacon in the church. She was a benefactor to Paul. Paul expected the church in Rome to receive her and listen to her read his letter to them. When Paul entrusted his letters to a messenger, that messenger would have the responsibility of reading the letter to the gathered church. In this case a woman, Phoebe, would be reading the letter from Paul to the church gathered in a home in Rome.

Then we have Prisca and Aquila. When Paul goes to Corinth he meets and stays with Prisca and Aquila, who have been expelled from Rome by Claudius, along with all the Roman Jews in 49 C.E. So Paul stays with them and the church that was already established in their home. Paul stayed in Corinth for 18 months, by the way. When he goes to Ephesus, they travel with him. They returned to Rome after 54 C.E as evidenced by Paul's mention of them in his letter to the Romans, "Greet Prisca and Aquila, who work with me in Christ Jesus, and who risked their necks for my life. . . greet also the church in their home." (Rms. 16:3-5)

So Paul mentions these three women Lydia, Phoebe and Prisca as leaders of the early church and his co-workers in mission. The stories about Paul's relationship with women as leaders of the early church have been greatly distorted.

Lydia, Phoebe and Prisca all loved the Lord and the Lord abided with them, both spiritually and physically. Because of the faith of these women the church grew. They preached the word of God and when necessary used words. They give us the example of how to follow Jesus' command "that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

Each of the women that I have mentioned this morning have been our foremothers in faith. They opened their homes to the gathered church, they walked with Jesus, they proclaimed the gospel. They preached the word of God by their lives and actions.

Our foremothers in faith had courage and told others how Christ loved them. May we also have the courage to “Go and tell” our world about the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.