

“Blessed Are You”  
Luke 1:39-55

In his 2007 documentary *America the Beautiful*, Darryl Roberts shows that in 2004 alone, Americans spent 12.4 billion dollars on cosmetic surgery. He shows how mothers are now putting children as young as five on diets or paying for breast implants for their 15-year-old daughters. There is a definite obsession with the standards of the fashion and entertainment industries. Do you worry about what people think of you? Do you worry when you feel that you have made the wrong impression on a new group of people? Do you feel self-conscious when you gain a few extra pounds or if your house, your job, your car, your daughter, your wife are not up to the standards of the people around you? How do we deal with life when we feel inadequate?

I think the first piece of this process is to realize that often times all the care and effort we put into looking or behaving perfect is mostly wasted energy. In his book *One Minute Wisdom*, the Jesuit priest Anthony de Mello wrote, “Before I was twenty I never worried about what other people thought of me. But after I was twenty I worried endlessly — about all the impressions I made and how people were evaluating me. Only sometime after turning fifty did I realize that they hardly ever thought about me at all.”

The second and most important way to dealing with our cultural obsession with perfection is to look at how God has dealt with our so-called “imperfection.” In our Bible story today we hear about a woman that is often hailed as one of the most perfect people in the world, namely Mary the mother of Jesus. This is the woman whom we often romanticize in our Christmas cards and paintings with a halo above her head showing her holiness. But the truth of the matter is that we really don’t know much about Mary’s life by reading the Bible. In fact, the people who wrote the four Gospels did not seem to think that stories about Mary’s perfection and holiness made that much of a difference in the story of our salvation and God’s love for us in Christ. What is emphasized about Mary is her being young and helpless. She was not the “perfect” vessel for God’s work because of her personal piety or her social status. Mary was around 14 years old, a teenager, a female, and one who probably came from an ordinary peasant family. All of these things show us that Mary was chosen not because of her perfection but instead because she represented the people who were vulnerable, the people on the margins of power. In that culture, a woman was not thought of very highly. It was scandalous for a woman to get pregnant out of wedlock. The song of Mary reflects this theme of God’s special concern for the oppressed, the poor and the suffering. The Jubilee theme of the Gospel of Luke is very clearly reflected in God’s choice of Mary as the one to bring God’s presence to the world in Christ. Mary knew that as she echoed the song of Hannah, the mother of Samuel which we find in the Old Testament. Both Hannah and Mary knew of God’s concern for those who are not in the halls of power in the world. Mary’s celebration in the Magnificat is a celebration of how God works. Throughout the Bible, God chooses to work through those who are deemed unfit or marginal by society. This is the story of God’s love as reflected by Mary and her song in the presence of her cousin Elizabeth. God’s love and blessings are not given based on our success, beauty or power.

This is a great message of hope for our world today where many of us think of ourselves as insignificant. Young people feel like they don’t matter. Old people often feel like they don’t count. The unemployed/underemployed feel helpless. The chronically ill and those with mental illness wonder what their life is for. The abused, the poor, those affected by domestic violence or war feel that they are disposable. But even those of us who don’t feel personally this way, we stand in solidarity with the pain of others and know their plight because they are our brothers and

sisters. This message of hope is for all of us to know that everyone matters to God, especially those who seem insignificant in the world. This message of hope is also a wakeup call for us for all of us to pay attention to God not in places of power and domination, but in places of love and humility.

One area in our lives that needs this kind of shift in focus is the way we think and look at aging. In his book, *What Are Old People For? How Elders Will Save the World*, Dr. William H. Thomas, world famous in the field of long-term care, offers a different way to look at aging, a way to embrace aging. He notes that, "The old way of seeing old age, as a time of relentless decline, ignores the value of the last half of life. Old age may be difficult but there is plenty of good in it as well." This Harvard-trained doctor shows that our mastery of aging is one of the most human things about us. In fact, he believes that our obsession with youth harms young and old alike and argues that aging boomers will change our society - one more time. "Creating a new old age will be the baby boomers' last act on the public stage." The American tendency to equate being old with being sick, mirrors the view of pregnancy and childbirth that held sway when the boomers were born. Obstetricians treated childbearing as an illness. Lamaze and others countered with a focus on women and their families and a recognition of the joyful aspect of birthing. Empowering the mother and strengthening her emotional support turned out to be a terrific way of reducing the very real pain of childbirth. Dr. Thomas shows that this approach succeeded because it embraced both traditional ideas about birthing and clinical practices and science. He writes that the Lamaze method did not "...seek to restore the birthing practices of long ago. Few would ever have accepted such a dangerous step backward. Instead it became a hybrid of old and new, different from anything that had come before. We are now preparing for a similar revolution that will transform old age and the lives of elders the world over." Dr. Thomas presents elderhood as a developmental stage of life that is an essential part of a healthy society, as important in its own way as childhood and active adulthood. At the heart of the fear of aging that grips so many adults is the dilemma of dependence and independence. Being independent requires you to live in your own home, no matter how dangerous and lonely that might become. Becoming dependent can easily lead to the loss of one's home and a terrifying move into a nursing home. These institutions are famous for stripping people of choice, freedom and self-determination. Dr. Thomas introduces a new vision of "intentional communities," of up to 10 elders who choose to live together with the help of several younger adults and strive to become a true community. "The idea that only large-scale nursing homes can be cost-effective and provide adequate medical care is false. It is time to liberate elders from institutionalization that saps their dignity and breeds helplessness," says Thomas. In their place, Thomas advocates small group homes for the aged mainstreamed into residential neighborhoods where elders can maintain their status as part of the community, share a meal and a story with familiar companions, and relish the simple pleasures and satisfaction of being old. With this new model, elders will be able to share their wisdom and their legacy with the children and adults who surround them, restoring them to an important place in our society.

This is the grace we find in this message of hope which comes to us today from the story of Mary as she responded to God's call and opened her life to the grace of God that is unconditional and which comes to people in such unexpected places. I pray that the grace which Mary experienced in her life and which brought life to many, will be real in your life, no matter how insignificant or helpless you may feel right now. May this grace be clear to each of us in those places where God's love is most evident: A hospital bed, a nursing home, a sidewalk where the homeless sleep, a soup kitchen where the hungry are fed and in the hearts of those who know that only God's love and grace are what matters in life. Our cultural obsession with beauty, youth, power and perfection is not where God's grace is really at work. It is not where we find our blessing. Perhaps some of you have pot holders or plaques to hang on the wall that

say, "God bless this mess." Mary's story tells us that God does bless us amid the mess of life. God blessed Mary in a messy time of her life.

The kind of blessing and grace that Mary experienced is the kind that the story of the *Velveteen Rabbit* tells. It is about knowing grace and love in the midst of pain. That is what makes us blessed and real. The Velveteen Rabbit asks the old skin horse about the meaning of being real. He says, "What is REAL?" ...Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?" "Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real." "Does it hurt?" asked the Rabbit. "Sometimes," said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. "When you are Real you don't mind being hurt." "Does it happen all at once, like being wound up," he asked, "or bit by bit?" "It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."

May we all know this kind of love and grace in our lives. Amen.