

Roses in Winter

A Sermon Preached by Stuart Taylor

Elkin Presbyterian Church

Dec.10, 2017 for the Feast of the Virgin of Guadalupe

It is the year 1531; it has been ten long years of suffering for the Aztec people since Cortez the Spanish Conquistador invaded Mexico. Aztec civilization is in its death throes; more ravaged by epidemic disease brought by the Spanish than by their swords. As Spanish officials arrive in increasing numbers, they are busy constructing Christendom on top of a vanquished culture, using the stones from the ruins of Aztec temples to build Spanish cathedrals. This is the historical context in which we catch sight of one lone peasant walking along a road. His name is Juan Diego. A recent convert to Christianity; he is going to visit an uncle who is dying of plague. Suddenly he hears beautiful music; he stops in his tracks and turns to see a young Indian maiden in shimmering robes who speaks to him in his own native tongue. Who are you? He asks. "Call me Little Girl, Young Daughter, Mother of my People". The maiden instructs Juan Diego to go to the palace of the Archbishop of Mexico and to tell him that Mary the Mother of God wishes that a temple be built at Tepayac. From this church Mary will be able to give all her love to the inhabitants of the land ... to hear their lamentations and remedy their pain and suffering. After two unsuccessful attempts to convince the arch-bishop of the vision, Juan Diego is sent by the maiden to find roses in wintertime in the desert where no roses could be found. Finally when again Juan Diego is standing before the Arch-bishop and his court, he unfolds his humble shawl and what falls from it to the ground are impossibly beautiful roses – roses in wintertime. And there in his cloak is the image of the Indian Maiden- the Virgin of Guadalupe. The church's response to this vision of the Virgin, ranged from outright condemnation to stony silence. But the story of the Virgin of Guadalupe spread among the people. And it was around the vision of her image that the Mexican people were able to reconstruct a new identity out of the ashes of devastation and death.

Today we know that the Virgin of Guadalupe is the national symbol of the people of Mexico. The Virgin of Guadalupe is also a part of the culture and tradition of the SW and of Hispanics who have migrated to the Mid-Atlantic States. I remember from my many years in Tucson that you could not drive around the city without seeing Guadalupe in yard shrines, painted on the sides of walls or on posters hanging from store windows. Guadalupe has resurfaced in history in more radical contexts. Cesar Chavez of the United Farmworkers movement carried her image on the picket line. In 1993 Indians supporting the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas marched beneath her banner. The image of Guadalupe continues to hold special meaning for the humble and oppressed peoples of the Americas. So why should we care? What does that have to do with us here in Elkin NC? It is significant that Juan Diego was commissioned by the Virgin to go to the Bishop, the most powerful representative of the new dominant culture, the Bishop who in effect represented European Christendom. It continues to be the task of Juan Diego to take the message of Mary to a church that has become indifferent to the plight of the poor, to those on the margins. As he went to the Bishop of Mexico, Juan Diego comes to us with a message from an Indian maiden. Guadalupe is calling to us to build a very particular kind of church? What does she have to say to us? And will we listen?

Juan Diego's task then and now is a daunting one. Why should we listen to him? For us to be evangelized by Juan Diego, for us to hear the message of "La Morenita", the little Brown One, Juan

Diego must help us overcome some significant barriers which I am not sure we can do without the help of God. First, we have to overcome our problems with God being revealed to us in the person of a woman. Part of this problem for Protestants has been our rejection of Mary. Historically our forefathers reacted to what we saw as the Catholic deification of Mary as part of the divine being, almost equal with the three persons of the trinity. They might have had some valid points to make in that debate. But in minimizing and ignoring Mary to the extent we have, we have lost a part of the Gospel story that allows us to see God as revealed in the life of a woman. There is a feminine maternal dimension in the salvation that God has brought us. That dimension is most visible in Mary because she is the mother of Christ and the mother of all human beings. In her we can see that God's salvation is tender like a mother's love. But we must not recycle the ways in which Mary has been relegated to a submissive, passive icon of perfection. This love of God revealed in Mary is unconditional like a mother, is passionate like a lover's, and fierce like a sister in the struggle. The Virgin of Guadalupe beckons to us from the periphery calling us to recognize the divine image that exists in every woman and to overcome the sexism that so marginalizes women in both church and society.

We have yet another hurdle to overcome to be able to respond to the God who is revealed to us as a person of color "La Morenita", the little brown one, the Indian. Guadalupe challenges the historic racism of church and society and our constant temptation of ethnocentrism to make European culture of western civilization the supreme expression of reality. For as Spain, France and England competed for the acquisition and development of this new American Empire they debated whether Indians and Africans had souls, could even be called human. Of course they had to come to this conclusion that Indians and Africans were less than human in order to justify to themselves what they were prepared to do to them to get their land and to exploit their labor. In 500 years of the history of the Americas, the Western European church has yet to heal itself of this original sin of racism. God continues to call out to the church through the face of a woman of color, challenging us to find healing for our racism and reconciliation between the races. We face yet another hurdle because the Virgin of Guadalupe reveals to us God in the person of the poor. Her messenger, Juan Diego belonged to the poorest peasant class of landless, exploited labor. In this way Guadalupe's message echoes the Song of Mary recorded in Luke 1:49 "God has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. God has put down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of low degree. God has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich empty and away". Juan Diego carries to those in power, the message of the Virgin to build a temple on the hill at Tepeyac. Tepayac the site of a destroyed temple of the Aztecs was a sacred site of a vanquished people. And as that Tepayac was a place on the margins, outside the bounds of the newly constructed imperial capital of Mexico. The request for a temple at Tepayac was not just for a building but for a new way of life being constructed in the ruins of the old. "La Morenita" brought a message from the periphery, carried by the most humble peasant to the wealthiest, most powerful in the land, the bishop of Spain's richest empire. Guadalupe was calling the church to re-inhabit the periphery, the edges of society among the poor, the displaced, among those considered to be non-persons.

But the Archbishop of Mexico like us needed the miracle of roses in winter in order to believe. Perhaps, we as well need a sign of hope, a promise of life like roses in winter that will enable us to hear the message of Juan Diego. I know that I can get very defensive when challenged by women about my sexism, or by people of color on my racism, or by the poor on issues of class. It is hard for

me to hear what feels like criticism. I am tempted to dismiss what I hear and to withdraw from any further contact with the source of my discomfort. It is so much easier for me to associate only with those who look think and behave like me. In offering roses in winter, Guadalupe offers us a sign that there is hope and life in this call to conversion. We do not have to be threatened or defensive. The Virgin of Guadalupe beckons to us in the hope that we can embrace a word of life in what seems like a challenge from the periphery. For in indigenous culture of Mexico, flowers like the music Juan Diego heard, were ways in which the all-powerful God communicated with humankind. Flowers are a sign of life, a sign that beyond suffering and death there is something greater even than life, as we know it. In offering the church roses in winter, she pleads with us to see that this is an invitation to walk a path, which leads to new life. Roses in winter evokes in us the hope that what separates and alienates us is not final but will be overcome, when women and men, when rich and poor, when black, brown, red and white all find their place of dignity. Roses in winter are a sign of resurrection, that life is greater than death, that unity is more real than all that divides us.

I would wager that everyone no matter how privileged we might be does have somewhere in our story an experience of being excluded or dominated or marginalized. What might be that experience for you? It is there inside of that experience of the margins that you may be able to hear the music that Juan Diego heard. It is there in that experience that la Morenita finds us calling us to understand what it means to reach out to brothers and sisters who are different from us. La Morenita accompanies all of us and so perhaps we too can explore what it might mean to accompany her. Where do we find her, her image and her spirit? We find her hovering over the Dreamer, the young immigrant student without documents who has known only this country and who lives with the constant threat of deportation to a country she does not know. Guadalupe stands beside the single mother who works in a fast food restaurant, wondering how she is going to pay the rent, feed her kids or provide for their health care. For those who have eyes to see there is the compassionate Virgin standing in line at a soup kitchen, sharing her consolation with a homeless family. We witness her pouring out her compassion on the elderly widow who at the end of the month must choose between food and medicine. She stands with the gang member who has never belonged anywhere except with his brothers. She offers hope to unemployed workers who long for the dignity of providing for themselves and their family. In her compassion she accompanies each one of us in the secret sorrows that we carry behind smiling faces. She accompanies us. But to offer accompaniment to her we must go to where she is, to the periphery. Because there she continues to call out to the church of the rich, the powerful, to find our true identity with Jesus on the periphery, with her son Jesus on the margins, among the sinner and the outcast, among the poor.

The story of the Virgin of Guadalupe is finally a story of healing. For in being obedient to his mission, Juan Diego learns that his uncle has been miraculously healed of the smallpox. And so this story has the power to heal us, to bind up the wounds that fracture the human family, between rich and poor, between men and women, between black, brown, red, and white. Mary continues to feel compassion for all her children. She accompanies them in their sufferings. She is a mother who does not hesitate to take sides when one of her children is threatened. She accompanies the lowly against the proud, the poor against the powerful. She is committed to overcoming age-old discriminations against women, against people of color, against the poor. In her the conquered and the conqueror finally discover the possibility of reconciliation. With her justice and mercy kiss. She is a model for faithful discipleship. She is a wise pilgrim, a witness to the coming transformation of the world.

She shares in the sorrow that accompanies the life of all human beings. In those who are laden with crosses, she sees her own son on the cross. But the mother of sorrows is also the mother of triumphant joy. Accompanied by such a mother, such a daughter, such a sister, such a lover, we find the strength to walk the path we must walk to be faithful disciples. She calls to us to build a church that truly celebrates diversity. A church that listens to the poor. A church that speaks with a voice of compassion. Where such a church emerges, roses will bloom in winter.