

**Sermon for August 17, 2014 (Saint Mary the Virgin)
Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary**

Texts: Galatians 4:3-9; Luke 1:46-55

Title: The lowness of his servant

“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.”

Welcome, my friends, to the celebration! Welcome to the feast!

Today is our patronal feast. It is our time to consider once again all together what it means to be a community called together in remembrance of, under the care of, in honor of, in the spirit of Mary the God-bearer, Mother of the Messiah, Mother of the Church.

And we have the privilege today to reflect upon the great song of Mary from the Gospel of Luke.

Because it's a celebration, and because we need to make sure that there's some energy here today, let me here you say it with gusto – that first phrase of the Magnificat, those first five words – as if you are Mary yourself, struck with wonder and awe. Ready? “MY SOUL MAGNIFIES THE LORD.”

Excellent.

But how can one magnify the Almighty? And what could that possibly mean for you and me?

Let me suggest to you that the rest of this great song of praise tells us what it means, as it gives us a glimpse into the Dream of God.

On Thursday, at the Global Leadership Summit (which I attended via satellite nears Portsmouth with ...), one of the speakers was Carly Fiorina, who previously served as the CEO of Hewlett-Packard and who now directs two very large philanthropic organizations.

She had some very insightful things to say about the task of leadership, and as she spoke, I heard the Spirit bring to mind the words of the Magnificat. The true calling of leadership, Fiorina said, is to unlock the potential of others.

The potential of human beings is the one inexhaustible resource to which we have access, but it is one which is sorely and sadly under-utilized.

Those who are poor, Fiorina said, are not in that condition because they lack potential. They are poor because they lack opportunities to unlock their potential.

Every human being has enormous potential, but most of this remains untouched.

This is one of the great tragedies about a place like Gaza, where 1.8 million human beings made in the image and likeness of God are literally trapped in a cycle of endless conflict, focused every day on the task of survival and so unable to participate in the great creative works of humanity. Who knows what potential for good is locked behind those walls.

Carly Fiorina went on to suggest that Jesus – as the Son of God – choose to live and to minister among the poor and working classes, not because he felt sorry for them, but rather because he knew the untapped, unlocked potential among them and it was his intention to release that energy loose in the world for good.

Just think for a moment about the choice of Mary.

This is the bold claim of the church! That God chose Mary – not for her external beauty, not for her good pedigree, not for her wealth or status. But because she was up to the task.

Perhaps one way of understanding God's choice of Mary as the God-bearer, the Theotokos, is to see it as key to God's plan to unlock the vast human potential of the poor which is squandered and throttled by those in power over them.

What do we know about Mary?

Not very much, and about all that we know from the New Testament is seen in the Mothers' Window on the south wall.

Have you ever looked carefully at the magnificent window on the north wall? It contains scenes of Mary's life from traditions after the Bible, and right in one scene you will find the traditional iconic image of Mary's body being taken to heaven, surrounded by the twelve.

What do we really know about Mary before the angel approached her?

She was lowly. Lowly. Just a peasant girl in the countryside. A complete nobody in the eyes of the world.

And what about the twelve? Those whom Jesus chose to be his world-transforming change-agents after his resurrection. Who were they?

Nobodies. At least, that's what people would say, but what does God do?

GOD chooses them!

That's what God does! Unlocks the potential in human beings when it is locked up and enslaved by the systems of this world.

If it is true that the real calling of leadership is to unlock the potential that exists in others, then I can think of no better example than what happened in the life of Mary.

If not for the action of God, we would never know about Mary or any of the apostles. We would never know their names.

Just like the myriads of human beings who live and die unnoticed and unknown, and – what is worse – unfulfilled.

And yet, both Paul's letter and Mary's song of praise tell us that they are the treasures of God.

At the very beginning of the Global Leadership Summit, Bill Hybels showed a photo of his father's prized racing sailboat. I know nothing about sailboats, so I cannot tell you anything important about it. But I know that his father bought this very unique and special sailboat with the backing of a few friends - sight-unseen from someone in Ireland. They sailed it across the Atlantic and up the St. Lawrence – all the way to Lake Michigan where the Hybel's family lived.

This sailboat became his father's treasure. He worked on it and maintained it and raced it. Unfortunately, however, Bill's father died prematurely. The family could not maintain it and it fell into disrepair. Eventually, they sold the sailboat and forgot all about it.

Until just a few years ago. Forty years after his father's death. One of Bill's siblings in Michigan happened to see their father's prized possession – this unique, iconic sailboat - up on blocks in the sidelot of a warehouse.

A discussion with the owner revealed its current value. He said that, if they would haul it away and get it off of his lot, then the family could have it back for 1 dollar.

That thing which had so captivated their father, which he had purchased with help from others, into which he had poured so many hours of loving labor, his heart treasure, now available for only one dollar.

My friends: God's treasures are very different than that.

And they never lose their value.

God's treasure is not diamonds or gold or silver.

God's treasure is the life of one who lives with humility, one who does not join in the endless pursuit of pleasure which is the system of this world.

God's treasure is one who serves, one who joins the divine work of filling the hungry with good things by helping them to unlock their potential.

God saw possibility, potential in Mary which no one else could see.

God chose Mary, and her name truly has been blessed by all generations.

But what does this mean for us? That is all well and good for Mary, but what does it mean for our lives?

First, my friends, it means that God intends to lead you and guide you along a path which will maximize your potential for good in this world. I believe that without a shadow of a doubt. The choosing of Mary signifies the choosing of each of us. What did Paul say about the reason behind all of this? So that we might be adopted as daughters and sons and become heirs of God.

Do you know what that means? It means that each one of us has more potential than we have dreamed possible. That is the truth about YOUR life!

Second, it means that God invites you and me to participate in this work by becoming and living as one who helps to unlock the potential in others.

Whether they are the people in your family, or your neighbors, the people in your workplace, or the people in Gaza and or Ferguson, Missouri, or the children of Haiti, there are lives everywhere that you can touch, that you can lift up, that you can help to unlock.

Far too many live, as Paul wrote, “enslaved by things that are not gods”, by social, political and economic systems that keep them down.

But we, my friends, are among those who lift them up.

This is the work of God. Mary was chosen and she responded in faith and trust.

You are chosen. And it does not matter how “important” your daily tasks might appear in society’s estimation.

Each choice, each word, each action can matter more than we imagine.

So will you do it?

Will you magnify the Lord as an instrument through which God can unlock the potential of others – for the good of the world?

May it be so.Amen.