

Sermon: *Mary, Mary, Quite Revolutionary*, Marisol Caballero

When I was a very young infant, before I would fully focus on faces or follow sounds much, I am told that I would stare in the direction of a statue that my mother had on her dresser of the Virgin of Guadalupe. No matter where I was in the room, I would try to turn toward that statue. My mom tells me it was the weirdest thing and that visitors to our house would often comment on it, saying that it looked as if I was communicating with her in some way. This may be coincidental, but it makes for a nice story. And, part of me likes to believe a little that I was born with a special affinity for the Lady, that she drew my eyes to her as she continues to draw my heart, and that a child development specialist can't easily explain this early story away. I don't truly believe that a statue has super powers, nor am I a closet Catholic- in fact I have been attending UU churches since age two, but there exists a subversive yet compassionate power in the story and symbolism of the Virgin of Guadalupe that transcends religion and that strengthens my faith.

It isn't often that we hear about traditionally Catholic imagery from our Unitarian Universalist pulpits but as a Chicana from Texas, my *cultural* connection to her runs deep. Just like each of us, my personal and cultural history influences my worldview and my theology, but I choose to speak from this perspective not because I wish to exoticize my story and my ministry or to become a novelty act. I choose to share such cultural expressions because it is my authentic starting point. One of my professors at seminary, Dr. James Cone, used to remind us in class that, "to do theology, you have to start where you're at. You must speak from your unique vantage point."

The image and symbolism of the Virgin of Guadalupe has much to offer UU's personally, of all backgrounds and genders, as we struggle to equalize the playing fields, seeking justice for the oppressed, and as we strive toward greater compassion in our daily lives, not to mention as we also endeavor to create a more multicultural Unitarian Universalism. But, before she can be understood as a universal emblem, the Virgin of Guadalupe must be understood, as her Mexican people know her.

As we learned in the story of her apparition to Juan Diego, the Virgin appeared in solidarity with the marginalized indigenous population. She chose Juan Diego, a poor Aztec, to carry her message. She spoke to him in his language, not the language of the oppressors, from which Christianity had been taught to the Indians. She had brown skin. She wore Aztec astrological imagery on her robe. She was one who they could identify with because she looked like them. She was one of them and *still* remains so. Most importantly, she does not allow the marginalized to feel inferior. She raises the self-worth of the Mexican people with a mother's compassion and offers her protection in their struggle.

The Mexican people, and those of Mexican descent, are a mix of various indigenous, Spanish (and other European), and African people. They speak many native languages in addition to Spanish, and many Mexican-Americans (Chicanos) speak no Spanish at all. Before the legendary apparition of the Virgin of Guadalupe, most Christian conversions had been made at the end of a Spanish steel sword. Mary had the effect of uniting the old and the new. She was a fusion of the indigenous and of the oppressor, much like the blood running through the veins of those she calls her children. She offered a means by which her people could retain their cultural identity with pride- with respect to the need for self-preservation amidst a violent theocracy.

This Mary continues to be such a means of synthesis for Mexicans and those of Mexican descent today. She unifies us as a cultural icon, no matter our language, religion, dialect or gender. She is our common mother, our loving ancestor. She is called by many names, among them are: Mother of Mexico, Mother of the Americas, (*Nuestra Senora de Guadalupe*) Our Lady of Guadalupe, and my great-grandmother- the matriarch of our family- called her affectionately, *mi morenita* (my little dark-skinned lady). She remains a symbol of strength for her marginalized people for after all, even if her story is only a myth, it reminds us that we *are* worthy of unconditional love.

In our science-minded culture, we say things like “*only* a myth”, as if myths were powerless things, when we have learned that myths are, in fact, values and ideals in the embryonic stage. Religions and nations alike were built on myths. (Remember George Washington and the cherry tree?) But, the story of the Virgin of Guadalupe is a *revolutionary* myth in that it offers us a woman (and a woman of *color*, no less!) as our champion! Maria de Guadalupe offers us all another way to imagine God. She is a feminine alternative.

Many White feminists have historically rejected her image, misunderstanding her due to centuries of misogynistic false interpretations. She has been said to be the reason that so many women dislike themselves, since she has been lifted up as the ideal of womanhood while women are simultaneously told that her perfection is unattainable. She has been accused of keeping women meek and silently obedient, since her eyes are cast downward. She has also been misinterpreted as a proponent of joyfully bearing one’s suffering, regardless of the hardship it may cause us and those we love. Some school districts have even banned her image on t-shirts, claiming ties to gang violence.

Latinas, however, have long known that although for centuries many have tried to pervert the image of Guadalupe in an effort to keep us in a subjugated place, most of us never truly bought it. She is quite the opposite. She is our Rosie the Riveter. Instead of being an ideal of womanhood that is unachievable, we

can emulate her willingness to stand up to power and demand that the oppressed be recognized. We view her downcast eyes as a representation of her gentle, loving spirit and she is not silenced easily- she persistently appeared to Juan Diego three times before the Bishop recognized him. She did not accept him backing down and inspired in him the courage to persevere. To Christian Latinas, she is more accessible than a Father God or His divine Son, Jesus.

Dolores Huerta, co-founder with Cesar Chavez of the United Farm Workers union, heroine of the Chicano Civil Rights Movement, and single mother of eleven, says, “I don’t think I could have survived without her. She is a symbol of faith, hope and leadership. She has been incorporated into everything we do,” she said, “If she’s not there, you notice her absence right away.” Mexicans and Chicanos have carried her image in just about every rally, march, picket, protest, and even battle for centuries. Anywhere there are people of Mexican decent advocating for social justice for their communities, chances are, the Virgin of Guadalupe’s image will be there as well. In fact, I was not at all shocked when, in some of the media coverage of the many nationwide protests of the hateful new Arizona immigration law, marchers have been carrying images and statues of her. No doubt the thought of a compassionate and persevering feminine representation of the divine is bringing strength to those in fear of what this law’s implementation may bring (or, has already brought) to their lives and to their families and communities.

In her essay, “Latinas and Religion: Subordination or State of Grace?”, Laura M. Padilla tells us that,

“The Virgin’s model allows us to discard the notion that we must accept our suffering with dignity, thus freeing us to turn our attention to how to alleviate that suffering, regardless of whether it consists of physical, emotional, economic, or spiritual abuse... [she] also turns from a top-down hierarchy where God speaks and we listen, to a model where we mutually communicate with compassion... [and] shows Latinas how to incorporate [our spirituality] into our lives in a holistic way that is not based on hierarchy, opposition, intolerance or superiority. Rather, she points us to a framework that incorporates the feminine, not to the exclusion of the masculine, but in balance with it.”

In the story, she chose to appear before a man, Juan Diego, demonstrating that although she is “divinely” feminine, she exists for men, as well. Men can also both be mothered by and guided by her, while also learning to emulate her maternal attributes of tender nurturance yet strong advocacy for one’s family. For Guadalupe, this family does not begin and end with bloodlines. Our family is made of up humanity, itself, for we are interconnected. The marginalized and the oppressor are both of her concern, as she reaches for the heart of the wealthy Bishop through the experience of the impoverished Juan Diego. Men may follow the example of her symbolism not only as the sons, husbands, fathers, and brothers of woman,

but also as members of the human family who recognize that ignoring the suffering of others prohibits the privileged from realizing *their* full humanity.

In this way, the Virgin of Guadalupe has relevance and meaning not only for all genders, but I would argue, all people. In the way that the image and symbolism of the Virgin of Guadalupe transcends religion, language, gender, and national borders, she also transcends race. Just as she unites the diverse people of Mexican descent in a common cultural identity, so may she unite the world to a common cause of justice, of working to end all forms of oppression. Although she will always be the treasured product of the Mexican people, the strength of her symbolism has the potential to reach anyone looking for a loving yet righteously angry, gentle yet fierce, and patient yet persistent ally in the struggle.

As UU's, so often we begin our prayers to "God of many names". In the Virgin of Guadalupe, we recognize that one name for God is "Mother". The feminine divine does exist in many traditions: Hindus have Kali, Lakshmi and others, Buddhists have Tara and Kwan Yin, and pagans may call her Gaea or Great Mother, to name just a few. The Virgin of Guadalupe is the manifestation of the feminine divine for this continent. She is our native goddess, Mother of the Americas, and offers the world her love, encouragement, and protection both to those who view her as a powerful symbol as well as to those who view her as a supernatural being with intercessory abilities.

Next time you see a candle, a keychain, a mural, or anything else that her ever-so-pervasive image adorns, see her for who she is to her people and who she can be for all- a powerful symbol of compassion, fortitude, and justice. Not a cultural cliché or tacky kitsch, but a reminder that we shall overcome, that *Si Se Puede* (Yes, it can be done), for she *is* Mary, Mary, Quite Revolutionary!