

## CALL THE MIDWIVES: FEMINIST SAINTS

Sermon by Rev. Marti Keller  
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 All Souls Church, New York City

In the run-up to the (latest) Royal Wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle in May, PBS offered multiple Masterpiece episodes of *Victoria*, and her royal wedding, and *The Crown* was streamable on Netflix, reenacting Elizabeth II's royal wedding. And there were assorted Diana bio pics and documentaries to put us in the mood for or to flesh out the back story of the internationally broadcast nuptials ahead.

In the meantime, in another wing of the often beleaguered contemporary Windsor family, there was the other, rapidly being eclipsed Royal News, the very recent birth of a third child to Prince William and his Duchess, and the pull to stream another enormously popular British public television import, *Call the Midwife*, since it had been reported that Kate Middleton's first two babies were delivered by, yes, she called in a midwife.

Huge confession to a UU crowd: I am not a big PBS Masterpiece or any other British TV fan (John Lewis quote), but after having faithfully followed *Downton Abbey*, on the recommendation of my decidedly not a PBS devotee Gen X daughter, through its entire six seasons, I was searching around to fill that Sunday evening comfort television slot and ran across *Call the Midwife*. Same time, same station.

This BBC series is based on a memoir by Jennifer Worth, who worked as a nurse midwife with the Community of St. John the Divine, an Anglican religious order founded in 1849. But we pick up their story and their work in the impoverished Cockney East End of London in the period between the end of World War II into the 1960's and a bit beyond.

It captures the day to day lives of these women in the Blitz bombed devastation and urban poverty of that time, in the wider context of the post-war Baby Boom, immigration out of former colonies, the founding of the British National Health Service in 1945, and the sea of change in reproductive health and choices that came with the introduction of the birth control pill in 1956.

Each episode focuses on a delivery or two, or six, in one show—91 onscreen simulated births, two stillbirths, employing both real and prosthetic babies made from the same medical grade silicone used to make artificial limbs, and a drawer full of pretend umbilical cords in different sizes.

Beyond portrayals of pregnancy and childbirth through the eyes of the bike riding mid-wives – miscarriages, still births, birth defects, unwanted pregnancies, a back ally abortion – the show has also taken on with accuracy and compassion, unremitting poverty, disease epidemics, prostitution, incest, alcoholism, disability, homosexuality, female genital mutilation, religion and racism.

Delving into the surroundings and issues surrounding their mission of bringing babies safely into the world, and beyond this:

Better lives, healthier families, and sustainable communities

Beyond living into the core definition of midwifery- the art and act of assisting births- the sisters of the order and the secular midwives who live and work beside them- they live into a second more expansive definition: “the art , act, process of bringing forth or bringing about”, in particular reproductive justice.

Reproductive justice, described by Loretta Ross, founder of the Sistersong Women of Color health collective as “ the complete physical, mental, spiritual and economic well being of women and girls, based on the full achievement and protection of women’s human rights-

The right to have a child.

The right not to have a child.

The right to parent the children we have as well as to control our birthing options, such as midwifery.

A newly published *Little Book of Feminist Saints* by Julia Pierpont, short, vibrant and surprising biographies of 99 “matron” saints, champions of strength, of progress, highlights women who broke ground and broke molds. It honors familiar and less familiar Heroines - artists like Mary Cassatt; writers like Audre Lord; scientists like Rachel Carson; activists like Ida B. Wells and Pussy Riot; other pioneers like Mary Edwards Walker, named matron saint of surgeons, who was initially denied her rightful medical credentials as a field doctor.

We are invited by the author to name our own feminist saint as the 100<sup>th</sup> so honored.

I nominated not one woman, but the historic legion of midwives.

A tortured vocation over the centuries, fought for by women who I believe deserve what we might call secular canonization. They’ve been around since the start of human history. In 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe, elder females who were called Good Sibs, the original word for gossip, recognized the function they served as community news bearers and literally lifesavers.

In Victorian England, the unsanitary conditions in so called lying in hospitals and the childbirth fever so rampant in them, drove upper class women including the Queen, countesses, duchesses, baronesses and other royals back into midwife care and safer home births.

Here in the U.S. and abroad, midwives were valued members of their communities until the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the States, where childbirth became more “professionalized”, and doctors groups began pushing for a monopoly on medical/obstetric care.

They began vilifying midwives, who were largely immigrants or in the American South, black women known as “grannies”—dismissed, caricatured, as having “fingers full of dirt” and “brains full of arrogance and superstition.”

By the 1950s, the majority of American births were in a hospital

By the 1970s and 80s, there was some return to popularity for home births overseen by midwives among progressive middle class white urban women.

While in England and Canada, midwife births account for around 50% of births- here in the United States it hovers around 10%, never having recovered by years of slander and vilification, the echoes of Middle Ages witchcraft.

A small and persistent group of feminist saints.

In my adult life, I have traveled to Washington D.C. and its Capitol Mall several times as a Unitarian Universalist to demonstrate, march and speak out for reproductive rights and the larger issue of reproductive justice. In April 1989, a large chunk of the women in my family camped in my brother's Maryland basement - mothers, daughters, aunts, sister in laws, joining a half a million others to call for abortion rights.

It was almost 30 years before my daughter and I met up again in DC last May for the so-called March for Moms, which was never a march but a rally gathering of prominent OBs, nurse midwives, politicians and survivors of maternal morbidity - near death from childbirth - and families of those who didn't - a father left with two young sons to raise, a grandmother who lost her only daughter.

At the same site where I had marched all those years before in the company of thousands, on the same site where the Women's March had taken place with another multitude early in 2017, this time around there only a few hundred spread out on the vast lawn.

The banner over the stage read "Lost Mothers," recounting the 2016 statistics on the 164 American women "known ones" who had died giving birth that year, and the more than 900 others whose identities are still unknown.

The anonymous 65,000-80,000 "near lost ones," whose lives were critically threatened, who may well have suffered permanent damage, but who survived.

Including my own daughter, the same daughter who as a teenager had reported her experiences for a national radio network during that massive pro-choice march so many years before. My only daughter who, because of good insurance, premium medical care and advantaged social and geographic location, did not bleed to death during a critically endangered pregnancy. Who, along with famous fortunate women like Kim Kardashian and most recently Serena Williams, experienced the medical and emotional trauma of the long hospital stays and separation from their families, and will undoubtedly face post-traumatic stress that will haunt them for years to come.

### **Mothers, Fathers, grandparents, babies all.**

So I was there that Sunday afternoon. Wouldn't miss it, while saddened and angered by the low turn-out, the media indifference. But heartened by the weekend of story-telling by those survivors who found each other. Over meals, in hotel lobbies, on the Mall, sharing their tales of damaged or lost organs, transfusions, near death.

And, as always, the midwives in their bright orange March for Moms shirts, cheering the women like my daughter on, the survivors and their families, all of us practicing metaphorical midwifery by our presence, by our collective witness against reproductive injustice.

Witnessing publicly to truths.

Truth.

That more US women are dying from pregnancy and childbirth complications each year.

Truth.

That the maternal death rate has more than doubled in the past decade.

Truth.

That the US has the highest rate of women dying during or just after childbirth than any other developed country due to poor access to health care, provider shortages, economic inequities, inadequate housing, less availability of good foods, and the stressors of racism.

Truth.

That black and native women are three to four times more likely to die.

In New York City, the death rate from childbirth is 4.7 per 10,000 live births for white women, 56.3 black women dying per 10,000.

A hideous disparity.

Every day and over time, midwives have witnessed to these injustices and then practiced age-old methods and demonstrated age-old attitudes that point the way to better outcomes, less sorrow, far fewer tragedies.

If we listened to their wisdom and enabled them to do their work of feminist sainthood.

A recently released *Pro Publica* report tell us that the full incorporation of midwives in healthcare systems could prevent more than 80 percent of maternal and newborn deaths worldwide.

Just in terms of reducing or even preventing medically uncalled for c-sections because midwives with their continuity of care from the beginning to the end of pregnancy and beyond promote seeing birth as “normal” process in the main, and not as a medical “event” that could go wrong at any time.

They are less likely to approach childbirth in terms of scheduling convenience and maximizing insurance reimbursements, more in terms of an ongoing, close relationship between midwife and mother.

Listening to women, trusting what they tell us (where have we heard that before recently?) as a core commitment, which might at least lessen the impact of systemic racial bias.

The ignoring, the disbelieving, the Othering.

New York is actually among the most receptive of the use of midwives and other birth helpers - number 5 in the country - scoring in the mid 50's out of 100 - still mediocre at best. Your outcomes for women of color in so-called black serving hospitals, the high rate of hemorrhaging and other complications which might have killed celebrities like Kim Kardashian and Serena Williams, which nearly killed my own child, has been recognized as still a major disgrace.

The work is far from over.

Following the March for Moms, in some symbolic and relational ways so rich in size and public impact so disappointing, I asked my daughter, going forward how are we all “called to midwife?”

She answered very simply and very directly.

Show Up.

Be informed.

Care.

Circling back to the larger definition of what it means to be a midwife:

“The art, act, process of bringing forth or bringing about.”

What health editor Lisa Daine sees as the innate human desire to midwife or be midwife:

To give or receive compassion, strength, calm, painstaking kindness, honor and peace

As we answer the call as Unitarian Universalists to achieve reproductive justice and the human right to worth and dignity.

Let us be moved by the thousands of activist feminist saints before us.

In the words of a prophetic sister:

May we honor the work of taking care of each other.

It is in the recognition of our profound interconnection with one another that we can rise up to protect what we hold most sacred.