# "We are all meant to be mothers of God"
## Mothering as embodied peacemaking

Susanne Guenther Loewen

*Did the woman say,*
*When she held him for the first time in the dark of a stable,*
*After the pain and the bleeding and the crying,*
*"This is my body, this is my blood"?*

*Did the woman say,*
*When she held him for the last time in the dark rain on a hilltop,*
*After the pain and the bleeding and the dying,*
*"This is my body, this is my blood"?*[1]

I have lived with this poem by Frances Croake Frank for the past several years as I have become a mother and begun to reflect theologically on that experience. Speaking about Mary of Nazareth, the poet articulates the covenants a mother makes in her body and blood with the God of Life. Connecting childbirth with the cross, it speaks of the costly vulnerability and profound strength that mothering entails as a theological symbol and an embodied, ethical, nonviolent act. Depicting Mary as speaking Jesus's Communion-instituting words—words forbidden to women in most Christian worship services—it poignantly knits together mothering and discipleship.

Of course, such connections are not without their dangers. Motherhood is all too easily idealized and imposed on women as a self-abnegating, mandatory role relegating them to the private realm of the home. According to the book *Mothering Mennonite*, this view of motherhood has until recently been characteristic of Mennonite tradition, in which mothers are simultaneously vitally important within the family (which historian Marlene Epp terms "a 'near-sacred' institution for Mennonites") and excluded from positions of community and church authority. Their voices and experiences have thus "been woefully ignored by Mennonite scholars,"[2] including theologians.[3]

Differentiating their view from the patriarchal, idealized understanding of motherhood, feminist scholars use the term *mothering* to denote "female-defined and potentially empowering experiences."[4] This term recognizes mothering as an active role, something women are or are not willing or able to undertake for various reasons, not a role toward which all women are naturally predisposed by virtue of inhabiting a female body. Anglican theologian Emma Percy proposes that "mothering should not be understood as an instinctual reaction but as an active commitment to a relationship"—a relationship, furthermore, involving "anxiety, ambivalence, and difficulties."[5]

Given these ambiguities and idealized distortions of mothering, why should it be connected to discipleship? Why can it not simply remain "near-sacred" or quasi-theological? As a theologian and a mother, I feel compelled to articulate theologically the sacredness of my own mothering as a deeply embodied experience of God in the midst of the ordinariness, frustrations, pain, and joy of pregnancy, birth, breastfeeding, and raising my child. While this experience is by no means universal to women, we can affirm and draw on this particularly female experience in order to bring to light the profoundly embodied, life-giving, and peacemaking aspects of our common call as Christians to discipleship in the way of Jesus—as Frances Croake Frank's poem above exemplifies. In what follows, I offer some reflections from a Mennonite-feminist perspective on mothering as both a literal, bodily experience and an evocative symbolic-theological image.

**As a theologian and a mother, I feel compelled to articulate theologically the sacredness of my own mothering as a deeply embodied experience of God in the midst of the ordinariness, frustrations, pain, and joy of pregnancy, birth, breastfeeding, and raising my child.**

## Maternal images of God

Though it might seem strange to focus on birth and mothering in light of the overwhelming emphasis on God's masculinity as Father and Son, this is not a novel image. There is a strong—if neglected—thread of birth and mothering imagery running through the Christian tradition. In the Bible, we find God described as giving birth to the people of Israel (Deut. 32:18, Isa.

42:14–16), as a comforting and nurturing mother (Isa. 66:13; Hosea 11:4), and as a fiercely protective mother bear (Hosea 13:8).[6] This is the God "in whom we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28): our mothering God, God as womb.[7] The Apostle Paul also speaks of himself as a mother suffering birth pangs (Gal. 4) or nursing the infant churches with milk (1 Cor. 3:1–2), and of all creation groaning in travail (Rom. 8) as God's reign and the new creation are birthed. In a similar vein, Jesus compares the struggle and joy of childbirth to the coming of the kin(g)dom of God (John 16:21–22)[8] and in his well-known lament over Jerusalem even speaks of himself as a mother hen: "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" (Matt. 23:37, NRSV).

Among medieval mystics, we find poignant examples of the long tradition of relating to the Divine as a mother. "What does God do all day long?" asks thirteenth-century mystic Meister Eckhart. "God gives birth."[9] For Eckhart, we are made in the image of this mothering God, for "We are all meant to be mothers of God," bringing God to birth in the world.[10] Julian of Norwich, a fourteenth-century mystic, famously describes Christ as "our precious mother Jesu," who feeds us with his milk of Communion.[11] The alternative interpretation of Christ on the cross as giving birth to the church in the water and blood from his wounded side[12] leads twelfth-century mystic Hildegard of Bingen to declare the cross God's nonviolent victory through birth ("without even using a warrior!")[13] and Anselm of Canterbury to proclaim,

> *And Thou, Jesus, sweet Lord, art Thou not also a mother?*
> *Truly Thou art a mother, the mother of all mothers*
> *Who tasted death, in Thy desire to give life to Thy children.*[14]

**Mary as mother**

Finally, there is the central female figure of the Christian tradition whose significance Mennonites have arguably overlooked: Mary of Nazareth.[15] With Mary, the symbolics of mothering slips into the embodied, as she is both literally/historically *and* symbolically/theologically a mother. Medieval depictions of Mary celebrated her embodied mothering, particularly in the proliferation of

images of Mary breastfeeding the infant Jesus. This Mary reminded Christians that "at the centre of the incarnation is a female body," of "the necessity of the female body for the human Jesus to be born." These are therefore simultaneously images of "Mary breastfeeding God" and of Mary's mothering power as God's life-giving power, since "we see the God of life in Mary—as the source and giver of life."[16] To me, this Mary speaks to the holiness of every child, to the sense of incarnation, of the enfleshment and embodiment of the image of God in every human being.

But Mary's role as a mother—and other biblical and historical images of birth and God as mother—has not always reflected favourably on ordinary mothers. This is especially clear in the history of Marian theology: Mary's virgin-motherhood has functioned within official Catholic doctrine to denigrate ordinary women's experiences of pregnancy, childbirth, and mothering. Catholic feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson observes a pattern "which exalts the symbol of the spiritual feminine but denigrates the sexual, maternal, carnal reality of actual women in the concrete."[17]

**In Catholic devotion, there remains a subversive sense that ordinary mothers are affirmed in Mary, since her prominent image conveys that mothering "is a divine and holy thing, worthy of adoration."**

Still, within popular Catholic devotion, there remains a subversive sense that ordinary mothers are affirmed in Mary, since her prominent image conveys that mothering "is a divine and holy thing, worthy of adoration"—a notion lacking in Reformation traditions.[18] On this basis, I want to suggest two ways the sacredness of mothering and its particular imaging of God can be recovered, without losing sight of the ambiguity that marks women's actual experiences of mothering or suggesting that mothering is a mandatory role for women. One concerns what we can learn from the bodies of mothers, and the other—relatedly—envisions literal and/or symbolic mothering as one way of participating in our call to embody peace in a violent world.

## Learning from our mothers' bodies

In pregnancy and those overwhelmed early months of caring for a newborn, I felt strangely as though I were following my body's

lead, taking cues from its generous hospitality, its patient, painful creation, birth, and sustenance of my infant son. I had a sense of this time being as sacred as it was difficult, yet I found few theological sources that articulate the significance of this experience, especially the experience of childbirth, in which one paradoxically touches death in order to give life. In retrospect, I have increasingly come to think of my body as a source for theological reflection, as I have been learning from my mothering body how to image God the Mother, the God of Life.

**Against interpretations that reify the violence of the cross or render it a symbol of masochistic submission to suffering, some theologians build on the tradition of viewing the cross as a moment of birth.**

Several contemporary feminist theologians have reflected in similar ways on what mothering bodies have to teach us, especially about suffering, redemption, and life-giving power. Against interpretations that reify the violence of the cross or render it a symbol of masochistic submission to suffering, some build on the tradition of viewing the cross as a moment of birth. For British theologian Mary Grey, this image acknowledges that labour and childbirth are "painful, messy, and hard work." At the same time, the image affirms women's experiences of pregnancy, labour, and childbirth as embodying life-giving love and struggle, of "co-creating" new life with God. She calls birth

> *a letting-go of self—in pain and struggle—for the creation of new being. . . . We are in the dark, alone, in that primeval womb of chaos from which all life emerged. And yet, in that very darkness we can meet God as creative center. We are held by that nurturing center: from this being-torn-apart, this sense of loss, together You and I wordlessly create new life.*[19]

Seen in this way, birth is the very opposite of violence and unjust death, reflecting a redemptive "*passion to make and make again / where such un-making reigns.*"[20] Grey explains,

> *This is far from being a call for women to have more children to save the world. Nor is it a glorification of motherhood at the expense of fatherhood. What I am arguing is that as Christianity has now had two thousand*

> *years of death symbolism, it is at least* possible *that the slaughter perpetrated in the name of Christendom is related to its symbols of death, blood-guilt, and sacrifice, and that an alternative way of encapsulating the redemptive events might stimulate more compassionate lifestyles.*[21]

In other words, images of redemption as birth instead of death and self-destructive sacrifice may lead to lives of compassion and peace instead of violence.

In much the same way, theologian Dorothee Soelle speaks of the pain of birth as unlike any other form of suffering. She rejects the idea that God is impassible or unable to suffer, explaining that

> *pain is a part of life because pain is a part of love. I do not wish to have a God free of pain, for I could not trust such a God. . . . The culture I seek is not one of domination and of having to win; it is one of compassion. The Christian religion could help people get ready for such a culture, because it derives its intensity from pain. It has interpreted the deepest pain as a pain of birth.*[22]

Using Paul's labour imagery in Romans and Galatians, Soelle speaks of the pain of labour and birth as "pain on behalf of life." She interprets his language of groaning pain as pointing specifically to "the last stage of giving birth," here understood as the final part of the struggle to see the coming of the Messiah. Soelle differentiates this kind of hopeful, life-giving struggle—which she terms "the pain of God"—from senseless, destructive, or masochistic suffering. Along these lines, she wonders,

> *How do we approach our pains so that they do not torment us like pointless kidney stones but, as pains of labor, prepare the new being? . . . How does our pain become the pain of God? How do we become part of the messianic pain of liberation, part of the groaning of a creation that is in travail? How do we come to suffer so that our suffering becomes the pain of birth?*[23]

For Mennonite feminist theologian Malinda Berry, Mary is a central example of how a woman's body makes possible the redemptive embodiment of God in history. In her view, Mary is

"the original embodiment of the *in utero* incarnate God," by which Berry means that that incarnate "embodiment has taken place in a woman's body as well as a man's." Berry clarifies, "I am not romanticizing pregnancy, nor am I saying being pregnant is the only way women have participated in God's self-disclosure!" Rather, Mary's pregnancy and participation in "the struggle of God's self-disclosure being birthed in this world—new life and new meaning when so much militates against it"—reveal "that God's revelation is inclusive of, and relies on, women."[24] Though we have not all experienced mothering ourselves, we can agree that "every person born into the world has known the hospitality of a woman's body."[25] These theologians invite us to see God in the generous, hospitable, strong, and labouring bodies of our mothers—and, following Eckhart, also to ponder the ways we "are all meant to be mothers of God."

## Mothering as embodying peace

As Grey, Soelle, and Berry suggest, mothering can disclose to us a form of power different from that of violence and domination: the power of vulnerable, life-giving love. Though it is a nonviolent power, it nevertheless requires great courage and strength, even ferocity, as seen in the biblical image of God as mother bear. Bearing and/or raising a child in the way of peace is an act of faith.

**Mothering can disclose to us a form of power different from that of violence and domination: the power of vulnerable, life-giving love. Though it is a nonviolent power, it nevertheless requires great courage and strength, even ferocity.**

But we are not accustomed to thinking about this work as an aspect of our discipleship. We look to the story in Luke where a woman calls out to Jesus, "Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you!" And Jesus responds, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it!" (Luke 11:27–28). We think of this exchange as displaying a contrast between mothering (body) and discipleship (spirit), but Elizabeth Johnson argues that they are two sides of the same coin, since Elizabeth also greets Mary with the words, "Blessed is she who believed"—a reference to Mary's yes to God's plan for her to mother the Messiah.[26] Focusing on Mary's subse-

quent *Magnificat*, her prophetic hymn of liberation for the lowly (Luke 1:46–55), Johnson asserts, "Mary's no to oppression completes her earlier yes to solidarity with the project of the reign of God." She continues,

> *Here is a rare glimpse of female reproductive power as both physically nurturing and politically revolutionary. . . . A pregnant woman is not the usual image that comes to mind when one thinks of a prophet, yet here are two such spirit-filled pregnant prophets crying out in joy, warning, and hope for the future. Clearly this is a picture of Mary that is the complete opposite of the passive, humble handmaid of the patriarchal imagination.*[27]

Mary's experience of mothering—beginning already in her pregnancy—led her to a commitment not only to the life growing inside her but to the very God of Life and to God's coming reign of justice and peace.

Mary is not alone in experiencing mothering as an act of faith that prompts acts of peacemaking and social justice. Dorothee Soelle tells of how in the era of the Vietnam War, her identity as a mother turned her attention to sociopolitical advocacy in behalf of children who were suffering. She writes, "I realized that 'motherliness' is indivisible; one cannot be a mother to one or two or three children and that's it. . . . One cannot care for a few children while supporting a policy that incinerates so many children, that lets them starve or rot in camps."[28]

Taiwanese theologian C. S. Song likewise speaks of the sacred life-giving power uniquely associated with mothers and which constitutes God's response to violence. He writes that pregnancy is "much, much more than a mere biological process. A life growing in the mother's womb is a matter of the spirit, an event of faith, an act of religion." Of Mary's pregnancy, Song writes,

> *Is this conception of life, this growth of life, this birth of life in the mother's womb not itself God's saving activity? One has only to recall that famous prophecy of Isaiah when the armies of the Syro-Ephraimite alliance were marching on Jerusalem. . . . "A young woman is with child, and she will bear a son, and will call him Emmanuel" (7:14). In that critical time of the nation,*

> *Isaiah did not point to the fortification, to the armaments, to the troops, but to a pregnant woman (or pregnant women) as the sign of God's deliverance.*

Song concludes that the redemptive hope and power that new life brings allow us to "believe in the victory of love over hate, life over death."[29] In depicting life itself as an act of faith and redemption, Song suggests that the life-giving power of mothers is more powerful than violence and death.

In my view, one of the most significant examples of this kind of nonviolent power which stems from mothers' (and others') commitment to life comes from Argentina, where a group of mothers courageously resisted the violence of the dictatorship in their country, protesting their children's "disappearances" at the hands of the secret police in the 1970s and '80s. Gathering in the city square, the group became known as the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo. Brazilian theologian Maria Clara Lucchetti Bingemer describes them:

> *They were only a group of women, mothers and grandmothers, who, in Buenos Aires, during the bloody years of military dictatorship, advocated for their lost children and grandchildren who had "disappeared" into the abyss of torture and death. Claiming something which belongs essentially to the private sphere, and* brandishing in the face of the dictator nothing less and nothing more than the violated right of their motherhood, *they created a political force with major repercussions. It was perhaps, the most eloquent and the best understood outcry against those terrible, dark years in their country and continent. . . . [Thus,] the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo emerged politically with new goals and challenges, giving birth to redemption for their whole people, born from the personal, inconsolable pain of losing their children.*[30]

Armed with nothing but their identities as mothers—givers of life—these women stood up to a military dictator, to a regime of unspeakable torture and violence. They stood as witnesses to the God of Life, confronting those who would presume to do away with the lives and bodies they had co-created with God. This

perspective on the power of mothering not only takes it out into the public square but also makes it a courageous act of nonviolence, revealing that the children in our lives can inspire our unswerving commitment to life, to work for the future of God's peace. Bingemer concludes that the ongoing witness of the mothers of the Plaza de Mayo is eucharistic, reflecting that their female bodies, "consecrated by the miracle of life," became redemptive for many[31] as they insisted, "This is my body, this is my blood." Following their example, we too can be images of our mothering God and know that, literally and/or symbolically, "we are all meant to be mothers of God."

## Notes

[1] Frances Croake Frank, quoted in *God's Mother, Eve's Advocate: A Gynocentric Reconfiguration of Marian Symbolism in Engagement with Luce Irigaray*, by Tina Beattie (Bristol, UK: Centre for Comparative Studies in Religion and Gender, 1999), 148.
[2] Rachel Epp Buller and Kerry Fast, eds., "Introduction: *Mothering Mennonite* and Mennonite Mothering," in *Mothering Mennonite* (Bradford, ON: Demeter, 2013), 2–3.
[3] Cf. Malinda E. Berry, "Needles Not Nails: Marginal Methodologies and Mennonite Theology," in *The Work of Jesus Christ in Anabaptist Perspective: Essays in Honor of J. Denny Weaver*, edited by Alain Epp Weaver and Gerald J. Mast (Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House, 2008), 272–73; Lydia Neufeld Harder, *Obedience, Suspicion, and the Gospel of Mark: A Mennonite-Feminist Exploration of Biblical Authority*, Studies in Women and Religion Series (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University, 1998), 10–11; and Carol J. Penner, "Mennonite Silences and Feminist Voices: Peace Theology and Violence against Women" (PhD diss., University of St. Michael's College, 1999), 14, 180, 3.
[4] Epp Buller and Fast, "Introduction: *Mothering Mennonite* and Mennonite Mothering," 8.
[5] Emma Percy, *Mothering as a Metaphor for Ministry*, Ashgate Contemporary Ecclesiology Series (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014), 61–62.
[6] See Joanna Harader, "Mothering, God," *Open Book with Joanna Harader* (blog), Brain Mill Press, May 8, 2016; http://www.brainmillpress.com/joannaharader/voices/open-book-with-joanna-harader/mothering-god/.
[7] Doris Jean Dyke, *Crucified Woman* (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 1991), 58.
[8] Some feminist theologians prefer the term "*kin*dom of God" because it replaces the hierarchical and patriarchal connotations of the term "kingdom" with familial language. See Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 166n9. I want to retain the political implications of the term "kingdom," however, so I have combined the two terms.
[9] Eckhart, quoted in Mary Grey, *Feminism, Redemption, and the Christian Tradition* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third, 1990), 177.
[10] Meister Eckhart, *Meditations with Meister Eckhart*, ed. and trans. Matthew Fox (Santa Fe, NM: Bear & Co., 1983), 74, 71. Cf. 79, 88.

[11] Julian of Norwich, excerpts from "A Book of Showings to the Anchoress Julian of Norwich," in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 7th ed., edited by M. H. Abrams et al. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 281. See also Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Womanguides: Readings toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1985), 110.
[12] Graham Ward, *Christ and Culture*, Challenges in Contemporary Theology Series (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 140.
[13] Hildegard of Bingen, quoted in Grey, *Feminism, Redemption, and the Christian Tradition*, 185.
[14] Quoted in Chung Hyun Kyung, "Who Is Jesus for Asian Women?" in *Asian Faces of Jesus*, edited by R. S. Sugirtharajah, Faith and Cultures Series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 235. Anselm is better known for his "satisfaction" explanation of the atonement.
[15] For a more thorough discussion of Mary, see my article, "Re-baptizing Mary: Toward a Mennonite-Feminist Re(dis)covery of the Mother of Jesus," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 34 (2016): 257–74.
[16] Elina Vuola, "(The) Breastfeeding God," *Ecumenical Review* 65, no. 1 (March 2013): 99–100.
[17] Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 23–25.
[18] Frances Power Cobbe, quoted in Sally Cunneen, "Breaking Mary's Silence: A Feminist Reflection on Marian Piety," *Theology Today* 56, no. 3 (October 1999): 333. Cf. Vuola, "(The) Breastfeeding God," 101.
[19] Grey, *Feminism, Redemption, and the Christian Tradition*, 177, 180, 185–86.
[20] Ibid.,180, 1; Grey's italics. The lines of poetry she quotes are from "Natural Resources," by Adrienne Rich (see her *Collected Poems, 1950–2012* [New York: W. W. Norton, 1977]).
[21] Ibid., 175. Cf. Beattie, *God's Mother, Eve's Advocate*, 196, who writes: "For women, blood has much more complex significance than for men. The male body only bleeds when it is wounded, but the bleeding female body is more likely to be communicating messages associated with fertility than with aggressive violence. This is not to deny that women's fertility can be a source of pain and violence, but a woman's blood can also be a positive sign of a healthy, properly functioning body, as well as communicating the awesome regenerative power of life."
[22] Dorothee Soelle, *Against the Wind: Memoir of a Radical Christian*, trans. Barbara and Martin Rumscheidt (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1999), 77.
[23] Ibid., 78. Cf. Dorothee Soelle, *Suffering*, trans. Everett R. Kalin (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 94–95.
[24] Malinda E. Berry, "A Theology of Wonder," *Conrad Grebel Review* 23, no. 1 (Winter 2005): 20–21.
[25] Dyke, *Crucified Woman*, 62.
[26] Johnson, *Truly Our Sister*, 247–48. A similar contrast between birth and "new birth" in Jesus's encounter with Nicodemus (John 3:3–6) is thoughtfully challenged in Natalie Wigg-Stevenson, "The Agony and Ecstasy of Baptism," *Sojourners*, January 28, 2016; https://sojo.net/biography/natalie-wigg-stevenson.
[27] Ibid., 260.
[28] Soelle, *Against the Wind*, 45–46.
[29] C. S. Song, "Oh, Jesus, Here with Us," in *Asian Faces of Jesus*, edited by Sugirtharajah, 134–35.

[30] Maria Clara Lucchetti Bingemer, "The Eucharist and the Feminine Body: Real Presence, Transubstantiation, and Communion," *Modern Theology* 30, no. 2 (April 2014): 376–77. Italics added.
[31] Ibid., 377.

## About the author

Susanne Guenther Loewen is currently completing a PhD in Mennonite and feminist theologies through Emmanuel College at the University of Toronto. She is co-pastor at Nutana Park Mennonite Church in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, where she lives with her spouse and young son.

# Heirlooms

Ann Hostetler

*"The things of this earth will grow strangely dim . . ."*

As I work the wet June earth I wonder what fruit
will grow from seeds with names like Green Zebra
and Golden Jubilee, why I dig holes and scrape soil
around the roots of seedlings when I can buy good tomatoes
in season at market. All these years I've loved the flesh,
the scent rising from the earth between my thighs as I squat,
hands deep in soil, sweat beading on my husband's back
as he spades, the teat of my son's hair at his nape
as he stoops to retrieve pebbles. All my life I have tried
to live as though the body is the soul, as though
planting and reaping were prayer. But what if the body
is merely the perishable fruit around the kernel
of the soul, the earth absorbing what's left,
harboring only seeds of next year's volunteers?

## About the poet

Ann Hostetler is the author of *Empty Room with Light*, a collection of poems, and editor of *A Cappella: Mennonite Voices in Poetry*. She teaches English and creative writing and chairs the English department at Goshen College, Goshen, Indiana. "Heirlooms" first appeared in *The Valparaiso Poetry Review*.