

**The Spirit Calls and Sends:
But Never Alone
Acts 2:1-4; Romans 8:14-18, 28-32
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Mary Breckinridge was supposed to be the young woman who had it all. Born in Memphis, Tennessee into the prominent Breckinridge family, she knew wealth and influence much of her young life. Her father was a Congressman who eventually was made US Ambassador to Russia. Her grandfather was a Vice-President of the United States. She was educated by tutors in D.C., Switzerland and St. Petersburg, in Imperial Russia.

Mary's mother was determined that she would be a successful Washington wife....and so she was married to up-and-coming Arkansas attorney Henry Morrison, who was expected to end up with Mary's father's old Congressional seat. But Morrison died just two years later.

Much to her mother's chagrin, Mary escaped her grief by pursuing a nursing degree from St. Luke's Hospital in New York.

In 1912, she met and fell in love with Richard Thompson, the president of Crescent College and Conservatory in Eureka Springs, Arkansas. They eventually moved to Thompson family property in Kentucky. There Mary had and lost two children....a daughter born prematurely who did not survive and a son who died at age 4 of appendicitis. The death of their son fractured the Thompson's marriage, and Richard ran away with a woman friend of his family.

A deeply religious woman, Mary turned to her faith—to prayer and study....and the more she read about the life of Jesus and the early church, the more she became determined to use the frustrations of her life to motivate her to do something worthwhile with her life and her talents. First, she went to work for the American Committee for Devastated France and traveled there to help bring much needed medical care to rural France, devastated by World War I. There she met the midwives of Britain and Scotland who had come over to care for mothers and children. And there she found her life's calling. After serving several years in France, she moved to Scotland to study

how they were providing maternal and baby care in the Hebrides...the isolated islands off of Scotland. She also trained as a midwife in the London Hospital...the same hospital featured sometimes on "Call the Midwife," though Mary was there almost 45 years before the events on that show.

Mary never forgot that she was not the only young mother to have lost young children in the mountains of Kentucky...that infant and maternal mortality were at nationally high levels. So, armed with her training and recruiting two other nurses to join her, she formed the Kentucky Committee for Mothers and Babies. The first clinic was followed by many more...but more nurse midwives were needed, and no courses were offered in the US to train them...so Mary privately funded sending young woman to London and Edinburgh to learn midwifery.

Eventually, her clinics spread beyond Kentucky and so they changed the name to the Frontier Nursing Service. Twenty years on, when World War II broke out, Mary couldn't send her nurses to Britain anymore, so they opened the Frontier Nursing University. Today, FNU, now mostly an online university providing advanced degrees and certificates in Midwifery and Nursing management, has more than 2000 students worldwide....and, you've probably guessed, it's based in Leslie County, one of the counties we will be working in starting next weekend.

Leslie County is poor...very poor...and small....somewhere south of 11,000 residents in the whole county...less than 1/6th of the population of Evanston, though it's more than 50 times larger in land mass.

You would never look at Leslie County and think a world-famous midwifery school would be located there...and if Mary had been looking for the place where her hospital would thrive, she probably would have chosen another location.

But she chose a location where there was need. She felt the Spirit of God calling her to bring her skills to where the people's needs were. It became her life's calling and she served as its director for 40 years until her death in 1965.

Today we celebrate the Spirit's calling the church into being. After Jesus' resurrection and ascension, there wasn't a church...there wasn't even a movement...there were only a band of his followers...those who worked with him, learned from him, were healed by him....

What would they do? Jesus had promised them that he would not leave them alone...that they would soon know and experience God's presence with them in a particular way...

The Book of Acts records that experience as an event on a single day....a day when many Jewish believers were in Jerusalem for a religious festival, including the Jewish followers of Jesus....

The event they experienced was one that drew people together....they could understand one another even though they were from different places....they were drawn together by a Spirit of purpose and community and grace....a Spirit that they equated with the spirit Jesus had spoken to them about.

When Paul was writing to the folks in Rome about 25 years later, he spoke of that same Spirit...a Spirit that would draw them together as the adopted family of God...I love the Greek word for adoption, because it has the same root as the word for biological child or heir.....I love that we are part of a tradition that has its very roots in the idea that families are made in many ways...but all have the same value...

I love how Paul tells them that this Spirit will never desert them...having made them a part of the family of God...It's easy to get caught up in some of the language Paul uses here...predestined and justification and joint heirs....and to spend hours...or as it turns out hundreds of years arguing about what he means....but I think all of those arguments miss the point.

Paul is telling the people in Rome who are already beginning to suffer persecution at the hands of the Roman authorities....the Jewish Christians had been chased out of the city a decade before and only recently had been allowed back...and already they were becoming scapegoats for the Empire.... Paul needed to help them do what Mary Breckenridge did...not to wallow in their pain, but to find a way to use their frustrations and their talents and abilities for the common good....in their case to band together to protect one another and to nurture their growing faith.

One of the things that Mary Breckenridge had to do when she brought nurses to rural Kentucky was to help both the communities and the nurses grow to trust one another...they were often very different people....Mary was from a wealthy Arkansas political powerhouse....even worse....a Democratic political family. Leslie County has NEVER, EVER voted for a Democrat for

any political office in the entire history of the County. But they saw past their differences with Mary and her family...and she did the same.

Both Lawrence and Leslie County have a couple of interesting things in common with Evanston....They have all been centers of temperance movements in their states. Leslie County is STILL to this day, a dry county. Lawrence changed their laws 5 years ago...a little bit after Evanston changed ours....

The other thing the three locations have in common was the landslide character of their voting patterns in the 2016 Presidential election....in all three locations, roughly 88 percent of the people voted for one of the candidates. It probably doesn't surprise you to know that our neighbors in Leslie and Lawrence county voted for a different candidate than 88 percent of Evanston.

Yes, there are many things that some would look at and ask why we are driving 1/4 of the way across the country to work in places with people who are so different than we are in so many ways...
But Mary wouldn't ask that question...and Paul wouldn't ask that question because they know that we can, indeed we must, build bonds across differences in order to achieve the goals of a healthy society and the Gospel of Jesus Christ...

Paul would remind us that we are all one family...the family of God...and that our adoption as children of God makes each of us as close as blood relatives....as important to one another and as responsible for one another as we feel for our children, our siblings, our parents....

Mary would remind us that she and the women who went out into Kentucky as Frontier Nurses found common ground in the work and in the common concern that they and those they served had in caring for the most vulnerable....the infants and mothers of Kentucky...

Some of us will be serving next week at the Race Against Hate, some of us will be serving here on Service and Worship Sunday, and some of us will be arriving in Leslie and Lawrence Counties to serve there for the next week....but we will all be drawn together by the same Spirit...the Spirit of God that draws the church together...that draws communities together so that we have identities we can claim as the beloved children of God that none can take from us....so that we have the peace of knowing we are

forgiven by the grace that same Spirit reminds us is Christ's gift to us....so that we can have the freedom from any fear that we aren't good enough or strong enough or wise enough to do what is set before us....because we know we aren't....but we rely on the Spirit to inspire us, to guide us and to comfort us when things don't go as planned.

In a season when the world, when the nation is so divided...we choose to be those who work for reconciliation and relationship....For 20 years, Evanstonians have been running and walking every Father's Day to proclaim that the white nationalist hate that killed Coach Byrdsong will not have the final say....For 15 years, Northminster has been traveling to Appalachia, not to proclaim that we are the wealthy white saviors from an affluent North Shore coming to help the poor people.....but working to break down the barriers that society so wants to create between people who believe or vote differently or live differently.

We don't do that just because it's the right thing...but because we feel compelled to do it...drawn by the same spirit who drew Mary Breckenridge to Leslie County....the Spirit who will create bonds among walkers and runners next week in Evanston, who will create bonds among those working side by side next week here...and who will create bonds among the 150 of us headed to Kentucky and the families we will meet....our siblings in the family of God.

I can hardly wait. May God be with us all. Amen.