



MIND AND HEART

A Podcast by Trinity Christian School

Ep 3 | SPECIAL: Thanks and Giving Part 1 with Mary Trombadore

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Jo Wilbur:

Welcome to Mind and Heart, a podcast by Trinity Christian school in Fairfax, Virginia. In this space, we explore our calling to raise up the next generation to be salt and light in the world. Welcome to Mind and Heart. I'm your host, Jo Wilbur. And today I'm sitting down with former first grade teacher, current educational therapist, and my mother, Mary Trombadore. How are you, mom?

Mary Trombadore:

I'm great, thank you.

Jo Wilbur:

I'm glad to have you here. Strange seeing you at work, but it's a lot of fun. Now, there are many things we could talk to you about today because you are an expert in education, but knowing you and knowing your story and your background, I know that you are someone who's really passionate about thankfulness and also giving. And since it is the Thanksgiving time of year, we thought we would just sit you down and talk to you about that and about your experiences. If you could start by telling us a little bit about your background and your upbringing.

Mary Trombadore:

Okay. Well, my father was raised in China, the son of missionaries. He has some great stories and he knows firsthand the providence and protection of God. He was there when the Japanese invaded and he was under house arrest. And so anyway, he has a lot of great stories. He went to seminary here in the states and he and mom really wanted to go back to the mission field. That was where their heart was, but mom's health would not allow that. Kind of by default, he became a pastor, got into the pastorate and we moved around. We were in a denomination that move their pastors very often. So the family moved from Michigan to Kansas, to California, and several different churches in each of those places, all the while adding more and more children until there were seven of us. I was right in the middle of those seven kids, but those were difficult years. I think dad really struggled. He's a very nervous man. And the pastorate is quite different than missionary work. When I was about nine years old, he came to the realization that he had probably never been called as a pastor. He stepped away from full-time Christian work. And that was a time of real floundering. Dad did not know what to do. And he went from job to job to job. We ended up in a little two-bedroom trailer, all nine of us. Those were very lean years, but very special years.

Jo Wilbur:

Wow. I think many of us, especially in this area, probably can't really imagine nine in people in a small two bedroom trailer. So what was that like? How did you make it work? How did you all physically fit?

Mary Trombadore:

Yeah, well sometimes I wonder, you know, we get together and we laugh about those those times and wonder how in the world did mom do it? There were two bedrooms and the biggest bedroom had two bunk beds in it for the four boys. We called it McBunk forest. You could hardly see the room for the beds. And then the small bedroom, we had a double bed in that room, took up the entire room and the three girls slept sideways on that double bed. You had to actually get on the bed to open the drawer built in. There was no furniture, no room for any other furniture. So it was very tight. And then mom and dad were in a hide-a-bed in the living room. The kitchen was only so big, but we had to also fit the dining room table with nine chairs in the kitchen. It was really snug. It is amazing that we all fit, but we did.

Jo Wilbur:

Clearly financially difficult, right? Yes. What about, you know, in terms of basic necessities like food, did you feel provided for in that area or was that also something that was a struggle?

Mary Trombadore:

Yeah. good question. You know, it's kind of funny because sometimes I feel like we witnessed the feeding of the 5,000 on a daily basis, you know, because sometimes just with the blessing of God, I think mom would take what meager food we had in the house and somehow feed nine people. And very often guests. I don't know where we put them, but we always had extra people in our little trailer. It was pretty remarkable. There were two specific times when mom didn't know where the next meal was coming from. They were praying because there was no food for supper. And there was a knock on the door and they went, opened the door and there was a bag of groceries. A very immediate and dramatic answer to prayer. I experienced the same thing years later in that little trailer- not knowing where the next meal was coming from, praying with mom, a knock on the door...and this time, it was a box of 12 donuts.

Mary Trombadore:

But to us it felt like manna from heaven, because we never got donuts. And so again, we got to see very dramatic answers to prayer during those lean years. But even though some of our basic necessities were scarce, Mom always had a heart for those who had less. And I remember in church one Sunday, we heard about a famine in Bangladesh and we hadn't even hardly gotten to the car for the ride home and Mom already had this plan. How we should all fast (well she reneged on that and gave us a one cup of rice and one cup of milk per day). And we sent all of our grocery money. Not that that was very much, but we sent it to help the relief in Bangladesh. She always knew that there were people who were even worse off than she was and did anything she could to help.

Jo Wilbur:

That's truly incredible. It's hard for me to even imagine volunteering to do something like that. And I usually know where my next meal is coming from. So that's definitely a testament to your mother's character. If you could give us an idea just of what were some other challenges of that, aside from just the space and the food. Were there other things that somebody who doesn't have the context wouldn't even think of as a challenge?

Mary Trombadore:

Well, one thing that sounds kind of silly, was laundry. Of course we didn't have a washer and a dryer. We would get up at maybe 3:30 or 4 in the morning, get all the laundry together, go to the local laundromat, fill up 10 washer loads. But even *that* mom and dad would make something special. We would sing hymns, have cart races. We had the run of the place and then we'd come home and mom would make her special cinnamon rolls, which were, you know, old stale, hot dog buns with the cinnamon glaze that she had created. And we would have that for breakfast and then go off to school. But it was something that we did together and somehow they would take those things that were really difficult and make them special.

Mary Trombadore:

Dishes! That was another thing you can imagine. How many dishes, nine people generated three times a day. We were constantly at the sink doing dishes, but again, we were singing hymns and it was a very together time. The money was meager. There was no direct deposit back in that those days. Dad would go to the bank and he would cash his check in very specific denominations. He would come home and mom and dad would do "the monies." And that was the three-ring binder. There were envelopes in that binder and they would parcel out the dollar bills into all the necessities, including, you know, money for the laundromat food, clothing, things like that. But the first envelope was tithe. That envelope was always filled... and they might run out of money. They might run out of money before they got to gas for the car or whatever, but tithe was always filled first. And that made a big impression in us. Mom always said that aside from salvation and her seven kids, poverty was God's biggest gift to her; that she learned more through poverty, more of God's grace and goodness than through anything else.

Jo Wilbur:

That's incredible and incredible how even just when you tell these stories, you speak of them as positive memories and fond memories, even though to me, it sounds... that sounds horrible! But I think that's so cool. The way that you speak of them in a positive way. You know we're in this season with the holidays coming up, where I know I plan to do lots of shopping. Many presents will be given. What were holidays like for you all back then?

Mary Trombadore:

Birthdays were interesting. They were meager, but we appreciated any gift we got. I remember one birthday of mine. I got seven boxes of my favorite breakfast cereal. That was my birthday gift and they hid them around the house. I had to find them all and it was very exciting. So things just that simple. However, there were other times... my younger sister played a flute beautifully. And there came a time when she needed a new flute. And of course that was well beyond our means. The whole family for months, we scrimped, we saved, we pooled all of our resources. Most of us had jobs because we were paying for our own dental bills, our own doctor bills. We just hoarded all of our savings, pulled together and bought my younger sister, a new flute for her birthday. And it was so exciting.

Mary Trombadore:

It was more exciting to give than to receive. And it was a whole family affair and it just brought us closer together. Thanksgiving was a time of sharing. And I remember in particular, one Thanksgiving, again, we scrimped and we saved, so we could give to those who had less. The church that we were attending was going to supply Thanksgiving meals for the needy. We contributed as much as we possibly could only to find out that we were, the needy. Christmases were very humble. One of my earliest memories was of mom. Of course there was no money for Christmas trees. She called the neighbors and asked if she could trim the evergreens that they had. And she worked so hard to string together those branches of evergreens to make some sort of a Christmas tree for us. And I just remember her hands blistered and, and bleeding, trying to do that.

Mary Trombadore:

But then how thrilled she was when she came home from the drugstore and she had found a Christmas tree for \$1 and she had bought it and it was a little white three foot Christmas tree. But to us it seemed like it was sent from heaven. And we used that white Christmas tree that I was in first grade when we got that and they were still using it when I left home and got married at 21 years of age, they were still using that little white Christmas tree because it was so special. So full of meaning,

Jo Wilbur:

Many of these stories center around your mother, my grandma, Grandma Peaches, unfortunately she has passed on now, but I'd love to hear just more about her, you know, where did she get that spirit of gratitude and giving? Because it seems like no matter how bad things got for you, she was always thinking of others. Where do you think that that came from?

Mary Trombadore:

That is such a good question. Because she was raised during the depression, her father owned and operated a church furniture business. He was a very talented carpenter and they never went without, they were never rich, but they were never poor either. And so where that feeling came from, I'm not sure unless she saw those who were much more needy than she was. She also came from a home that was very open to others. Her parents were constantly, constantly inviting people in and sharing whatever they had. She grew up in Winona Lake Indiana, which you young people wouldn't know, but was the home of Billy Sunday, a very famous evangelist. And he lived right in their town. And so there would be these huge Bible conferences and they would open their home and just pack up full of people who would come to hear Billy Sunday and Billy Sunday's tabernacle. She had wonderful memories of that kind of sharing and togetherness.

Jo Wilbur:

And what a gift that she gave to her children in teaching you all to be that way and in turn, you teaching us to be that way. That's amazing. And I remember her fondly and I think also just her closeness to the Lord I'm sure influenced her heart of gratitude and of giving. She was always in prayer, always singing hymns. So growing up you know, we spoke about your, the financial challenges that you all faced as a family growing up. As a child, I mean, do you remember when you think back on those memories, were you aware that you were in a financially worse off situation than maybe your neighbors or your community at church or your community at school? Was that something you were aware of or when did you become aware of that? Was it something that you were self-conscious about?

Mary Trombadore:

For a long time, I don't think I was, it was such a happy home. But when we moved into that trailer, I remember in fourth grade a classmate asked me why I wore the same clothes all the time. And I, I just remember being taken aback and that people did notice, and I don't know what my response was, but of course the reason I wore the same clothes all the time was because I had like two sets of clothes and the that's all I had. We also always were on free lunches in middle school. In order to get my free lunch, I had to use a meal ticket that was a different color. And I was just too proud to do that in front of my peers. I just, I remember those lunch periods. I would be so hungry, but I would always pretend that I wasn't hungry because I was too embarrassed to pull out my white meal ticket, which I'm, you know, I'm embarrassed to say, I could never tell my mother. That would've broken her heart to know that that I was going hungry just because I was too proud.

Mary Trombadore:

She would've been concerned for my soul, I think. And you know, we always worked and I would save a dime every day, and together with a friend, we would buy a 20 cent ice cream sandwich and split it. And that would taste so good. To this day, I love ice cream sandwiches, and that's what I ate for lunch every day. I guess one other very vivid memory was when my youngest brother was in the hospital and he was in kindergarten and mom was at the hospital. We almost lost him. He had several surgeries and mom was exhausted and she came home and went to bed. The rest of us kids were in the kitchen, which is connected to the living room. And there she's in her hide-a-bed in the living room and we're doing homework.

Mary Trombadore:

And there was a knock at the trailer door and the doctor's wife stepped into mom's bedroom, which was the living room. And that, that vision... because the doctor's wife was beautifully dressed. You know, hair done, makeup beautiful. And here was a mom in her hide-a-bed. And I just saw the contrast of those two women. And I don't know what that, how mom felt about she never let on that, that she was embarrassed by that or anything, but it made an impression on me. And I think I realized for the first time how difficult things were for mom. Those are a few memories I have.

Jo Wilbur:

Man. That's difficult. And like what you said, giving up lunches and you know, having those awkward moments, someone asking you about your clothing. I imagine growing up, that's hard. As an adult, looking back at that childhood and some of those difficult experiences, do you regret that childhood? You had, you know, your mom said poverty is a blessing, but for you looking back, do you wish things had been different?

Mary Trombadore:

That's such a good question. And I have to say a resounding, no. Not at all. In fact, well I had a new friend, we were on a long, long flight together and we were getting to know each other and telling each other about our childhoods and everything. After telling her about my childhood, and maybe playing up the poor aspect a little bit, you know, get a little extra sympathy or whatever, she turned to me and she said, "You have lived such a fairytale life. And I want you to know that to whom much is given much is required, and God's going to require a lot of you because he has blessed you so richly." And I thought what a strange reaction, you know, here having just told her this sad story. And yet she saw right through that and saw the joy and the incredible blessing and privilege of growing up in a Christian home, that there could be that much struggle and yet that much joy and that much gratitude and that much thankfulness and she was absolutely right. When you asked me if I'd be willing to do this [podcast], that's what came back to me. I do have so much to be thankful for. This is a privilege to share.

Jo Wilbur:

I know that. And once again, just hearing stories of your childhood, growing up as a child, myself, your past has been a blessing to me too, because you've shared so many stories of seeing firsthand God coming through when you didn't know where your next meal was coming from or when you didn't know how things were going to work out or how you were going to make ends meet. And I do remember one particular story that comes to mind. I don't know if you're going to share, but when you fell ill as a child, just talking about that as, a time when you really saw God's presence... I don't know if you can share that.

Mary Trombadore:

When I stepped on the rusty nail. Yes. And I got blood poisoning, and there was no car to take me to the doctor. So mom loaded me up in a little red wagon with my three younger siblings. The other kids were in school and she had a long walk. Of course I was small. I don't know how long the walk was, but I know it took us along a very busy highway. She pulled me, she carried one of the kids. She, I mean, it was a struggle. She got me to the doctor. The doctor said, she, your daughter needs this medicine because this is life threatening. She went right to the drugstore, but she didn't have any money at all. And she was so embarrassed. She didn't know what she was going to do. She talked to the pharmacist and the pharmacist did not budge.

Mary Trombadore:

He was not going to give her that medicine that she could not afford, could not pay for there on the spot. And she couldn't go home and get the money because there was no money at home. And as she was wondering and praying, what am I going to do Lord? A person from their church walked in and she

mustered up the courage to ask if she could borrow enough money to pay for the medication that I really needed. And of course that person was very willing and able to help her out. And God sent them just at that, just at that time when mom really needed help.

Jo Wilbur:

And without that, you could have lost your life. Yeah. It sounds like that is true. So that, and so many of these examples are great examples of giving and the impact that giving can have. Even for that woman, it might have been not that much to give. And yet it saved a life. You know, scripture talks about being cheerful givers, giving cheerfully unto the Lord. What do you think it means to be a cheerful giver and how can we give from a place of joy and find joy in that giving?

Mary Trombadore:

One thing is to realize that really every good gift in our lives is from God. And if we truly believe that, we'll know that that gift really does belong to God, not that we should feel guilty about what God has given us. I think maybe that's kind of surprising for me to say because now I feel so blessed. I have so much, and I remember maybe feeling a little guilty at one time to have so much now compared to what I had growing up. But then I realized no to not appreciate these gifts is an insult to God. I need to see them. I need to appreciate them, enjoy them to the fullest, but to hold them with an open hand and knowing that it's, they're really gifts, beautiful gifts for God to use and having received so much, it does help to be, to be on the other on the other side of that, and to be able to help and to be able to give, so that's one way of giving cheerfully. I'm kind of a, I'm an amateur cheerful giver. My mother lived it. I mean, she took such joy in giving things, it pleased her more just having that kind of witness. And that kind of example was for me, the biggest help.

Jo Wilbur:

I know you and dad have a beautiful home and Luke and I, my husband and I, are blessed to live just five minutes down the road from you. And every time I go over there, so often there are people in there or you are, you've got the youth from church in there or the pastor is over for lunch or... so many times. And so I can see the way that you all live and use those gifts to benefit other people. I know that's a huge blessing. How do you think the church can do a better job of supporting and uplifting our brothers and sisters who may be struggling financially kind of like your friend in school who asked about your clothes. She might not have been trying to be cruel, but maybe it hurt you.

Mary Trombadore:

One way I think is, is to actually turn a blind eye to the marks of poverty, look past it, see the person, see how smart they are, how interesting are they are, how talented they are. They have an awful lot to offer. They might not have material things or money to offer, but they have time. They have wonderful ideas. They have energy and, you know, thankfully people could look past mom's poverty and, and cherish what she could give, what she did give of time. On the other hand though, or on the other side is to actually see those marks and think about how we might relieve some of those in quiet ways. It's a little of both, I think. And if God has blessed us with much, then he's given us a special job, which might be a hard job. Like the rich young ruler.

Mary Trombadore:

When we have much, sometimes it's harder to give much, but we might be that bag of groceries on the doorstep, that box of donuts, that money for the medicine. And so to be prepared- even when we're not expecting it, we can plan to give, but there's so many times when the opportunity presents itself and just on the spur of the moment, be able to offer a meal, open your home. If we've been blessed with little, then it might actually be easier to share, like the widows might. You know, God will take even what we have and use that for his glory, even if it's not money, time, energy. We can rejoice both with much and with little. And I think those who have little, maybe poised to see the hand of God a little more clearly, a

little more often. You don't live that close to the edge and miss what God will do on, you know, on your behalf and when you're in need. So that's a very special place to be.

Jo Wilbur:

Well, thank you so much for coming in today, mom, I'm so thrilled that you were willing to share your story. I know it will bless all of our listeners.

Mary Trombadore:

Thank you.

Jo Wilbur:

Thanks for joining us for this episode of Mind and Heart, a podcast by Trinity Christian School. For more information, visit us www.tcsfairfax.org.