

## Mother and Daughter of God

Happy Mother's Day! On this morning when so many of us celebrate our mothers and others who were like mothers to us, it's only fitting to remember Mary, Mother of God, who gave Jesus his humanity and raised him to adulthood. It can't have been an easy task. Motherhood can be difficult under any circumstances, and Jesus presented his mother with special challenges. Imagine what it must have been like to raise a child who already knew everything – unlike most teenagers, who only think that they do – and who could miraculously repair anything he broke, make any food he didn't like disappear from his plate, and wipe away your memory of any mischief he got into. How would you teach that child to be loving, thoughtful, and responsible? How would you, a mere mortal, educate him to worship the divine Father whom he had known since before Creation came to be? How in Heaven's name could any human woman possibly raise her own Redeemer?

Jesus's early years are shrouded in mystery from the time his family returned to Nazareth from Egypt until he showed up at the Jordan River to be baptized by his cousin John. We don't know how much Jesus knew about his own divinity as a child or when he came to understand his heavenly mission. Mark's Gospel suggests that Jesus didn't learn about his divine parentage until he heard the voice of the Father say, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." Luke's Gospel, on the other hand, tells us that the twelve-year-old Jesus slipped away from Mary and Joseph on a visit to Jerusalem to go sit among the teachers in the Temple. When his frantic parents finally found and gently scolded him, his response was, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" Luke provides no clue to our Lord's tone of voice but, as the mother of a former tween, I wouldn't be surprised if it was tinged with adolescent scorn, even though Luke assures us that Jesus returned to Nazareth with Mary and Joseph and was obedient to them thereafter.

Although we know next to nothing about Jesus the child, we know a little more about Jesus at age thirty or so when his public ministry began. Joseph disappeared, though we don't know whether he passed away or simply became irrelevant to Jesus's narrative. The Evangelists don't linger over characters once they've played their assigned parts. Mary was still around, however, and appeared occasionally in Jesus's

story. It was Mary who nudged Jesus to perform his first public miracle, turning water into wine at a family wedding in Cana. Once word got around that Jesus was creating controversy and might even have gone a little crazy, Mary took his younger brothers and tried to see him, but Jesus rather rudely turned them away. She might well have been present when Jesus was rejected by his former neighbors in the synagogue at Nazareth. We can only imagine how embarrassing that must have been for her. Yet, Mary stood by her brilliant, difficult son. We don't know how much of Jesus's Passion Mary saw, but John's Gospel assures us that she was present at the foot of the Cross when her boy was crucified, helplessly bearing witness to his suffering. It must have shattered her heart.

Mary was probably in Jerusalem for Jesus's last Passover. It's hard to imagine how she could otherwise have made the sixty-mile trek from Nazareth to be at the foot of Jesus's cross in the time it took Rome to condemn and crucify him. And yet, if she was in town, there's no indication that Jesus invited her to join him and his friends at the Last Supper. Mary Magdalene and Jesus's other followers appear to have been conspicuously absent, too. John's Gospel suggests that only the twelve disciples whom Jesus handpicked were present for his final discourse and the beautiful prayer we heard excerpted this morning. And that, I think, says something important about mothering.

Tradition assures us that Mary and Jesus were mutually devoted, but nothing in Scripture tells us how their affection for each other played out. No matter how much she loved him, Mary doesn't seem to have spent much time with Jesus over the course of his three-year ministry. Maybe she couldn't bear to watch what he was doing. As he preached, taught, healed, and fed the masses, Jesus made a lot of powerful enemies. He sometimes seems to have enjoyed it. No matter how fervently Mary begged him, the Gospels give us no reason to believe that Jesus would have stepped back from provoking the religious authorities and courting Rome's wrath. Mary's son was a man with a mission and no one, not even his dear, devoted mother, was going to talk him out of it.

Mary raised a child like no other. And yet, I wonder whether her experience was all that unusual, at least in one respect. Children have a remarkable gift for being themselves no matter how hard their parents work to mold them. Psychology tells us that pushing children too aggressively to become

something or someone they don't want to be can damage them profoundly. Parents who pressure their children to give up their dreams and do something sensible, lucrative, or prestigious with their lives may think they're protecting their kids, but they may instead be pushing their beloved little ones toward an unhappy, haunted future. They forget that their children are not theirs. Children, just like their parents, belong to the Father who placed his own Son at the center of a vast cosmic drama with consequences far beyond what's at stake if little Sydney grows up to be a jockey, a ballerina, or a stockbroker. Our Father is a very good God, but he doesn't seem to be especially concerned about keeping his children safe, at least not in the way that anxious parents understand safety.

Jesus didn't have a very high opinion of the world. As the Reverend James Liggett explained in his 2021 sermon "Pearls and Grit," "when Jesus says 'world' here, He's not talking about the created order—rocks and trees and bunnies and things like that; instead, he's talking about human society organized as *it* sees best to promote its own purposes." The world as we know it wants obedient consumers who care very much about comfort, safety, and the good opinion of those who claim to know how everyone else ought to live. The Father wants faithful, loving children who desire above all else to do his will, and who recognize that the Father's will won't be fully done until every one of his children is free to live into whom he created them to be. We're not supposed to cower in safety while our siblings suffer injustice and Creation falls apart. Like Jesus himself, we are to go into the world without too much concern for its dangers so we can help the Holy Spirit and be united with Jesus and each other. The world won't like it – Jesus says as much. But as Christians, our job is to please the Father, not the world, and our faith requires us to trust that the Father will protect us even when what we're doing, or what our children are doing, feels uncomfortably risky. As parents, we all have to step back at some point and resume being God's sons and daughters, setting our children free to help bring God's Kingdom into the world.

Like much of John's Gospel, Jesus's prayer is a mouthful. It repeats itself, doubles back and defies easy comprehension. That may be the point. As children, we need the simplicity of "Jesus loves me, this I know, 'cuz the Bible tells me so." But as adults, we gain spiritual muscle by wrestling with the complexities of our faith. As the Spirit moves you, spend some time with this Gospel passage in the

coming days. It may well surprise you. But if nothing else comes clear for you, remember this. We are God's children, and our big brother Jesus prays to our Father to protect us. Nothing the world throws at us can overcome the combined strength of our Savior and our Creator.

If you're a mother, you know how tempting it can be to try to protect your children from their dreams. This world can be a harsh place, and most mothers want to keep their children safe from every peril. If you grew up without a mother, or with a mother who was unable for whatever reason to take good care of you, you might wish you'd had the benefit of a little "smother love" as a child. And if you're the mother of a child who was lost to the dangers or temptations of the world, the last thing you may want to hear is your priest sounding off about letting your children lean into their divine destinies. Preaching on Mother's Day carries its own risks; don't hesitate to let me know if you think I got it wrong today.

We don't know whether Jesus appeared to his mother after the Resurrection. Matthew seems to think so, but there are a lot of Marys in the Gospels and we can't be sure which one Matthew meant. I'd love to believe that Jesus gave his mother the priceless gift of showing her that he had overcome the worst the world could throw at him. But whether he did or not, we know that Mary bore witness to the birth of her son's new faith. Our lectionary skips past it, but Luke tells us in the Acts of the Apostles that Mary was present when the disciples called Matthias. It's an odd little story. Jesus had ascended and the Holy Spirit hadn't yet appeared, so the disciples found themselves waiting and praying for whatever was going to happen next. Peter, always a little impatient, decided that they needed to call another disciple to replace the treacherous Judas. Matthias won the draw, then disappeared from the story, having served his purpose of bringing the disciples back to their full number. That might not sound like much, but perhaps it showed Mary that her son's legacy would live on. I'd like to think she took some comfort in that.

Every one of us had a mother at some point, a human woman who brought us into the world. If you had a good mother, God bless you. God bless you even more if you did not. And if you've been a mother, God bless you for every good thing you did for your children, and God forgive you for every mistake that you made. We're none of us perfect, but we're all beloved children of God. May Mary the Mother of Jesus smile on you and your loved ones this day and always. Amen.