

## *Jesus and His Mother*

John 19:25-27

Steve Hollaway

Harbor Church

May 9, 2010

I don't think we need to be instructed to love our mothers, but if we did, Jesus' words from the cross would be an appropriate text. Jesus had been flogged and slapped, mocked and spat upon, and now he hangs from a cross-beam with nails piecing the place where nerves are bundled together at the juncture of hand and wrist. He is wearing only a crown made of thorns pressed into his scalp. His executioners are gambling for his clothes while he hangs naked. He is in pain. He is thirsty. He knows he is dying.

Jesus looks down through the blood and sweat he cannot wipe from his eyes, and he sees standing nearby his mother and his best friend. His other followers have run away. Those he has trained for leadership have gone. But his mother—whom he has pushed away at other points in his life—is still there. And so is his best friend, the one who sat next to him the night before when he shared a last meal with his disciples, telling them the truth about his death and their betrayal. So Jesus sees with human eyes the two people he cares most about in the world. And he gives them to each other. “Mom, this is your son. Friend, this is your mother.” *“I think I heard him say, when he was hanging on the cross, I think I heard him say, ‘Take my mother home.’”*

Nowhere in the Bible are we commanded to love our mothers. We are told to honor them, but never to love them. I think it's because that kind of love is so basic to the human experience that it doesn't even need to be commanded. We all know that to dishonor our mothers or to fail to take care of them is to be inhuman. We say “I can't believe he would treat his own mother that way.” 1 Timothy says that it is worse than being an unbeliever.

Loving our mothers is complicated, of course. No one ever had a mother who didn't overdo it—except for those whose mothers neglected them entirely. Being a mom is a no-win proposition. You will always be smothering or distant, too close or too far, too controlling or uncaring. There is no instrument for measuring the proper distance from your child. You think you have it right when your daughter is ten, and then she turns eleven. You finally learn to talk to your son when he is forty, but all of a sudden he is fifty.

Some of us come to Mother's Day with dread either because our mothers have recently gone or because our mothers were always gone. Hearing about motherhood can become an exercise in self-pity, telling ourselves that we are so different from all the other people who had these great mothers they are talking about. But I repeat: loving our mothers is complicated. That is the nature of the relationship, and it will always be so. The psychologist Erich Fromm had it right when he said, “The mother-child relationship is paradoxical and, in a sense, tragic. It requires the most intense love on the mother's side, yet this very love must help the child grow away from the mother and to become fully independent.” Every healthy mother wants to hold her child close forever and yet knows she has to push the child away.

We may not think of Jesus and Mary that way, but the gospels give us plenty of clues that their relationship was complicated, too. The *only* story the gospel writers preserved about Jesus' childhood—the *only* story, think about what that means—is a story about Mary losing Jesus in the big city. When she finds him in the Temple discussing theology at age 12, she bites his head off: “How could you have treated us like this? Your father and I have been looking all over for you. We've been going out of our minds!” You notice that from Mom's point of view it's all about Mom. 12-year-old Jesus looks at his out-of-control mom and asks her “Why were you looking for me?” Mom must have thought, “‘Why?’ Are you nuts? You're only 12 years old!” In

my family that kind of question got the reply, “Don’t sass me!” “No,” Jesus says, “I meant *why* did you have to look all over? You should have *known* where I would be.” That’s going to go over well. “Didn’t you know that I *must*—that it is my destiny— that I must be concerned with the things of my Father?”

So there it is. Mom is not the last word, not anymore. She has to learn that, but it is a hard lesson for any mother. We may think that this story is only about Jesus and his weird parentage, Superboy reminding Martha Kent that he is Kalel from another world. We may think that it is all about his being God-Man and now leaning toward the God side. But Luke follows this up by saying that Mary treasured this memory in her heart—*treasured* it!—and that Jesus *grew up*. This is a story about Jesus growing up, and we all grow up—well, most of us. At some point we face choices between being ourselves and doing what Mom wants. We find something that calls us beyond the expected patterns of behavior. We find a concern that is deeper than our concern for family. It does not replace that concern—Jesus still loves his mother, and Luke says that when he got back home to Nazareth he obeyed her (I’ll bet he *did* after that little episode!)—but the concern to discover and do what God wants pulls us over and over away from mom.

In John’s gospel the other story about Mary is set at a wedding party in the nearby town of Cana. Mary comes to her now grown son Jesus, but again she is frantic. “They have no more wine!” Did any of you have a mother who thought you should fix every problem? Jesus did. “Mom,” he says, “what exactly does this have to do with you and me?” Actually he may have said something stronger, because literally it’s something like “Ma’am, what is this thing between you and me?” What exactly do you think is the nature of our relationship? I am I your fixer? Am I your trick monkey?

I once was part of a Baptist-Catholic dialogue group in New York City consisting of Baptist ministers and Catholic priests, and I had to present a paper responding to Pope John Paul II’s encyclical declaring Mary a Redeemer along with Jesus. I brought up this story as an example of the human tension between Jesus and Mary, and his challenge to her authority. The priests responded, “Yes, but Jesus did what his mother said!” True enough in this case, but I don’t think it’s because Mary pulls Jesus’ strings.

Consider this harsher example from Mark 3:21. Jesus was being accused by the religious of being *demonic*. Listen to how the family reacts: “When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, ‘He is out of his mind.’” Jesus’ mother and his brothers want him to be normal. Yes, he’s doing miracles and is followed by big crowds, but he’s crazy. The truth is that if you started acting like Jesus your family would probably think you were crazy, too. Moms don’t want their sons to be like Jesus, not really. They don’t want them to be hated. They don’t want them to get themselves killed. If you start acting like Jesus, your mom might try to take charge of you, too.

Fifty years ago the Greek novelist Nikos Kazantzakis wrote *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Martin Scorsese’s movie of it in 1988 caused a big stink because it featured what Jesus’ life might have been like if he had not gone to the cross and had a life with Mary Magdalene. But the thesis of the novel was that the last and strongest temptation of Jesus was the temptation to have a normal human life—as it is for many of us. In the novel, Mary prays:

*Have pity on me, Father! A prophet? No, no! And if God has it so written, let him rub it out! I want my son a man like everyone else, nothing more, nothing less. Let him build troughs, cradles, plows and household utensils as his father used to do. . . . Let him marry a nice young girl from a respectable home - with a dowry; let him be a liberal provider, have children, and then we’ll all go out together every Saturday to the promenade - grandma, children and grandchildren - so that everyone can admire us.*

[Nikos Kazantzakis, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Simon and Schuster, 1960, 64]

To that prayer, Mary's rabbi replies, "Mary, if God listened to mothers we would all rot away in a bog of security and easy living."

In Mark's gospel Mary wants to take Jesus home to normalcy. Jesus is inside a house crowded with people. Mary and her other sons come to get Jesus, and they send word to him: "Your mother and your brothers are outside looking for you." Jesus must have thought, "What's up with my mom always *looking* for me?" Here's what Jesus says for everybody to hear: "Who *are* my mother and my brothers?" Then he looked around the circle of his students who were seated at his feet, and he said, "*Here* are my mother and my brothers! (Not those people outside the door looking for me.) Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother."

And *mother*, he says. Can you imagine being Mary and hearing that? Jesus relativizes the role of family. It's not all about family and family values. It's about doing the will of God. Jesus' own obedience to the will of God has distanced him from his family. Jesus is in the process of creating a new family—the family of those who receive the kingdom of God and do God's will.

I grew up in a Southern Baptist culture that really valued foreign missions, and we sang that you should "give of your sons and your daughters" to reach the lost in other lands. But I knew how hard it was for my grandparents when my parents actually moved from Arkansas to Japan and then kept us grandkids away from them for five years at a stretch. It was a sacrifice for everyone involved, but for the most part it was accepted because it was understood to be God's will. I've noticed over the years, though, that the idea of giving your son or your daughter to be a missionary or a preacher or a priest, while not as popular as it once was, is still the one case in which Christian moms are even willing to consider the possibility of losing their children to the will of God. Moms, remember, as Mary had to learn, that God's will may be very different from what you want for your kids. God may call your child to serve the poor or even to *be* poor. Can you live with that? His will may be for them to live among an ethnic group you don't like. God's will may be for them to challenge a culture that has blessed you and your family. God's will no doubt is for your child to grow up to love your enemies. Can you live with that?

If our children grow up healthy they grow away from us. The more we love them the more we want to see that happen, but we hate it. Mary went through that with Jesus. In the end, she must have accepted Jesus' mission. There she was at the foot of the cross. There she was in the Upper Room after Jesus was gone again, praying with his followers.

But here's the thing I want all of you to remember on Mother's Day: no matter what kind of tension there was in Jesus' relationship with his mother, he never stopped loving her. He didn't stop loving her because she wanted to control him or because she was trying to turn him away from the painful parts of his mission. And she, of course, never stopped loving him. She was a mother. She was willing to risk her own life to be there for him when he was dying.

And at the moment when he was dying, when he was carrying out the most difficult part of his mission, when he was saving the whole human race from their sins, Jesus thought of his mother. He looked at his best friend and said, "Take my mother home." The lesson Jesus gave us as he died was not only to take care of our mothers but to take care of every one else's mother when they are all alone. One of the most remarkable things about the church in the first century was that they took care of all the women who had lost their husbands and were in need. The mother of my brother or sister in Christ is now *my* mother. That is part of what we mean when we talk about our church family—not that we have lost our human families of origin, but that we have gained a new family of brothers and sisters and mothers who do the will of God.