

“WHO IS MY MOTHER?”

Robin E. Lostetter

First Presbyterian Church, Bordentown NJ

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Matthew 12:46-50 (Micah 4:1-4, Acts 10:34-43)

***“And pointing to his disciples, he said,
'Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever
does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.’”
—Matthew 12:49-50***

Just before our Gospel reading today, Jesus had been talking about the clash between the rulers of the earth and the Kingdom of Heaven. It's gotten a little heated, and some scribes and Pharisees have asked him for a sign. You can almost hear an echo of Herod's words to the Magi. You recall how he instructed them, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and worship him.” Here the temple officials say, “show us a sign – prove your identity - then we, too, will honor you.” Their insincerity is palpable. They're simply trying to trap him. And Jesus responds with a reference to the story of Jonah's three days in the belly of a big fish.

Through the lens of history, we now understand that story to be a metaphor for Jesus' resurrection.

So he's saying, between the lines, “You want a sign? You'll get a sign! After you've had me killed, I'll be alive again in three days.”

Then Jesus goes on about only good trees yielding good fruits and evil coming from the heart and mouth of evil people; and about the accountability of these unjust Temple rulers – spiritual leaders whose comfort would be disrupted if they acknowledged Jesus' identity. It's not a pleasant exchange they're having.

And while he's speaking, some poor unnamed messenger comes up and interrupts him. “Uh, Rabbi, you're mom's on the phone.” Well, yes, I know, there was no phone, but it had the same effect. Matthew makes it sound as though Jesus doesn't wish to be interrupted. Phrases come to mind, such as “tell her I'm on another call,” or “Tell her I stepped out of the office”.

But the messenger persists, “Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.” And Jesus, perhaps seeking to drive home his point about heavenly good versus human evil, takes advantage of this moment and points to his disciples . . . those who stand with him, against the corruption of both the Temple and the Empire.

“Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” he demands. And underscoring his gesture toward his companions, he states, “Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”ⁱ

Dismissing good ole Mom — quite a nice message on Mother's Day, huh? But let's look more closely, because there are feminist elements here, and hints of practices in other religious traditions.

First of all, it is his mother, Mary, and his brothers who stand outside.ⁱⁱ This is precisely what the original Greek says. But then Jesus says, “whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.” And again, this is precisely what the original language says. In other words, the disciples to whom Jesus points include both men and women.

We read elsewhere that Jesus had sisters too, but they are not mentioned as being outside with Mary and Jesus' brothers on this particular occasion. But in a day when women could not serve as legal witnesses, and whose status depended in large part upon the man with whom they were associated, Jesus acknowledges women among the disciples, as witnesses to his ministry; and in fact, he gives them status by naming them as his mother and sisters. Quite amazing, really!

And there is another factor here – one which I haven't had time to research, but which has intrigued me. At an interfaith lunch at Princeton Seminary this week, we learned that there is a parallel and honorable place for women in Islam as well, whether or not they are mothers. Mohammed's words do hold mothers in the highest regard. But for those who may happen not to be mothers, there were women named among the "companions of Mohammed" — the equivalent of disciples. And if we look at later Christianity, where motherhood is, of course, held in honor and where Mary is sometimes seen as the purest model of motherhood, we find single women in sacred orders, living in convents, finding their identity in their attachment to Jesus as Bridegroom.

It's an interesting phenomenon, and I'm sure someone out there has studied it and can make comparisons across religions and cultures. But for me, today, the point is that motherhood is not strictly a biological definition. We are all bound together in the family of faith, all of us in relation to Christ as our brother, and all of us contributing the best of our nature to the community. Whether we're Mary or Martha, Leah or Rachel, there are attributes of women that have been celebrated throughout the history of our Judeo-Christian heritage. Not all of those women were named, and not all women had the freedom to use their gifts outside the home. But among Jesus' disciples, that inner circle of the One about whom it was said, "there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female"; the one who has broken down the dividing wall of hostility between us — the One who spoke with the woman at the well and the Canaanite woman, and who praised Mary of Bethany for sitting to listen, in the role usually taken by a male student — in that inner circle, there was gender equality.ⁱⁱⁱ Oh, not enough to have named all the women among the disciples, although we know some of them, but in Jesus' presence, there was welcome for all.

Now, I'd like to take a little side trip. Let me read you a few verses from scripture that point to one of the other attributes Jesus was known for, besides his stunningly egalitarian approach to women.

First, in Micah, in the chapter immediately following today's Old Testament reading, we have words that we associate with Advent and Christmas:

But you, O Bethlehem,
from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.
. . . he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD,
. . . and he shall be the one of **peace**. (5:5)

The end of that passage, Micah 5:5, says, "he shall be the one of **peace**."

And in our second reading today, from Acts, chapter 10, we read, "You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching **peace** by Jesus Christ."

In Ephesians, the verse which I cited earlier, regarding breaking down the dividing wall, goes like this: "For he is our **peace**; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us." (2:14)

It's my understanding that the tradition in this congregation is to celebrate Mothers' Day with an

emphasis on peace and peacemaking, recognizing Jesus as the Prince of Peace. This would, of course, make Julia Ward Howe proud, as the arguable catalyst for Mothers’ Day. She is quoted as having said this: “The question forced itself on me, ‘Why do not the mothers of mankind interfere in these matters to prevent the waste of human life, which they alone bear and know the cost? I had never thought of this before. The august dignity of motherhood and its terrible responsibility now appeared to me in a new aspect.”^{iv}

Her Mothers’ Day Proclamation in 1870 was a call to women internationally to counsel together and seek to end national divisions. Quite a lofty goal, and one which, clearly, has not been attained. Howe was just one of the several women whose efforts ultimately led to the presidential proclamation establishing Mother’s Day in the United States in 1914. But her strong words against violence and warfare resound today without losing a bit of their bite. Here is an excerpt from her initial statement:

“Arise all women who have hearts, whether your baptism be of water or of tears!
Say firmly . . .
Our husbands shall not come to us reeking of carnage for caresses and applause.
Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn all that we have been able to teach them of
charity, mercy, and patience.
We women of one country will be too tender to those of another country to allow our sons to
be trained to injure theirs. . . .
The sword of murder is not the balance of justice.
Blood does not wipe out dishonor, nor violence indicate possession.”

Her words make Micah’s oracle about beating swords into plowshares sound almost palliative and abstract. Of course, that could be because we can envision swords and plowshares only in the abstract. To the folk of Micah’s day, however, his words were as real and pungent as were Howe’s words about husbands reeking of carnage.

So what are we women called to do on this Mother’s Day? Hallmark and every retailer under the sun has issued a call to our husbands and children to send cards and “gifts that she’ll remember,” preferably diamonds! And who would turn those down?

But what are we called to do? I can’t answer that for each of us with specificity. I can only suggest that, based on scripture, we might want to take our discipleship more seriously. We are not just silent bystanders. Jesus has named and claimed us, and that is a high calling.

And if we have been claimed and called by “The One of Peace”, what are some of the dividing walls that we as Christian disciples might try to bring down? Where is a measure of maternal peace in order? What divisions warrant the church’s attention? Maybe those divisions can be lumped together as all our societal “isms” — you know, racism, sexism, ageism, and the like. In the pattern of Galatians we might say, there is neither white nor black, Mexican nor American, there is neither child laborer nor free, there is neither male nor female. And we could, of course extend that — there is neither old nor young, straight nor gay, able-bodied nor disabled, rich nor poor, insured nor uninsured — for all are one in Christ Jesus, who is our peace, and who has destroyed the dividing walls for all time in the Kingdom of Heaven.

As each of us, male or female, considers what peacemaking we might be called to as disciples of the Prince of Peace — I’d like to close with some poetry by Brian Wren. Wren is a hymn-writer

and Anglican priest whose work includes favorites such as the Easter hymn, “Christ Is Alive! Let Christians Sing”, as well as more unfamiliar texts. Here’s one that you probably have not read or sung. It celebrates the gifts that we all bring to the faith community - men, women, young, old - and these gifts are reflections of the attributes of our God.

Listen to the words of the hymn, **“Bring Many Names”**:

Bring many names, beautiful and good,
celebrate, in parable and story,
holiness in glory, living, loving God.
Hail and hosanna! Bring many names!

Old, aching God, grey with endless care,
calmly piercing evil's new disguises,
glad of good surprises, wiser than despair:
Hail and hosanna, old aching God!

Strong mother God, working night and day,
planning all the wonders of creation,
setting each equation, genius at play:
Hail and hosanna, strong mother God!

Young, growing God, eager, on the move,
saying no to falsehood and unkindness,^v
crying out for justice, giving all you have:
Hail and hosanna, young, growing God!

Warm father God, hugging every child,
feeling all the strains of human living,
caring and forgiving till we're reconciled:
Hail and hosanna, warm father God!

Great, living God, never fully known,
joyful darkness far beyond our seeing,
closer yet than breathing, everlasting home:
Hail and hosanna, great, living God!

Indeed — Hail and hosanna, great, living God! Alleluia! Amen!

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ENDNOTES

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- i. See parallel in Luke, 11:27-28, While he was saying this, a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to him, “Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you!” But he said, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it!”
 - ii. See Mark 6:3 “Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?”
 - iii. Gal 3:28, Col 3:11, Eph 2:14, Luke 10:39.

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- iv. Sources for this brief historical note include Wikipedia and <http://www.theholidayspot.com/mothersday/history.htm>.
- v. Words: Brian Wren, © 1989, revised 1994 by Hope Publishing Co., Carol Stream, IL 60188.